

# Much Ado About Yuffie

by Guardian1

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Summary: Misery loves company; Yuffie/Vincent. Finally chaptered for easier perusal.

## 1. Part One

Much Ado About Yuffie

><font><font>Please, review! I crave feedback. I need to know whether I should continue<font>

><font><font>with this or leave it in the trashcan as hand-warming material.<font>

><font><font>Suggestions would be wonderful.<font>

I wrote this WWI - writing whilst inebriated. Of course, I was only

><font><font>inebriated on Mountain Dew, but hey.<font>

The title is purely out of fun. There are so many things you can

><font><font>do with the word Yuffie, although I pointedly ignore my brother calling<font>

><font><font>my genre of writing 'Yuffie the Vampire Layer'.<font>

On we go.

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Much Ado About Yuffie

><font><font>\_\_\_\_\_<font>

> <p>

\_I hate Kalm. I hate Kalm. I hate Kalm. I hate Kalm.\_

Yuffie lay on her bed in Tifa's and Cloud's house and

><font><font>groaned miserably, turning over.<font>

\_I hate Kalm. I hate Kalm. I hate Kalm. I hate -\_

"Hey, Yuffie!" Cloud said, coming through the door with

><font><font>a big smile. "What do you think of Kalm so far?"<font>

"It's great," Yuffie said with a wan smile. Sixteen-year-old

><font><font>Yuffie would have not been proud of this new, upgraded,<font>

><font><font>five-year older version.<font>

Cloud read the lie and sat down on her bed. "I know it's

><font><font>pretty much boring at the moment. But this month there'll<font>

><font><font>be all sorts of festivals and things, so you can take your<font>

><font><font>mind off... things," he finished lamely.<font>

"My father's dead, Cloud," Yuffie said kindly. "You can

><font><font>say it if you want."<font>

Cloud sighed. "So you can take your mind off Godo's death.

><font><font>We like having you here, Yuffie." He smiled at her and pinched<font>

><font><font>the corner of her mouth lightly. "So give me a smile?"<font>

Yuffie groaned and turned over. "Clou-ouud! Stop it!" The

><font><font>goofy smile on Cloud's face was getting goofier by the minute.<font>

Cloud chuckled. "Okay. Want to join us for dinner? You

><font><font>haven't eaten since you got here."<font>

The tiny ninja shook her head, her unkempt dark hair

><font><font>falling into her eyes. "I'm not really hungry," she half-whispered.<font>

"Oh, Yuffie.."

Yuffie turned over. She couldn't bear the pity she saw, the

><font><font><em>poor Yuffie</em> look practically everyone had in their eyes.

><font><font>Cloud ruffled up her brown hair and left as she clutched at her<font>

><font><font>pillow, waiting for the tears that never came.<font>

><font><font>Better to be back in the jungle, walking to Kalm, than to be<font>

><font><font>here and drowned in the pity of those that did not

understand.<font>

><font><font>It must have been forever that she tossed and turned in the<font>

><font><font>spare bed in Cloud's house; but finally she slept, an empty<font>

><font><font>sleep devoid of dreams.<font>

The morning light shone through her window and she awoke

><font><font>gently, all her losses stabbing in her heart. That had all been<font>

><font><font>last night. She felt no different. Why? Would she ever<font>

><font><font>feel different?<font>

\_Dad, why am I such a bad daughter?\_

\_Why did I never obey you before? Why can't I cry for you?\_

\_It's not like... it's not like I didn't love you, or maybe I never did\_

><em><font><font>love you, maybe I'm incapable of loving? Is that why I'm not crying<font>\_

><em><font><font>now? Is that why I can't feel your death inside my heart?<font>\_

\_I cried when my mother died. I cried when Aeris died. I cried\_

><em><font><font>so much I thought I'd die. Have I only ever loved them?<font>\_

><em><font><font>Or maybe I just joked myself into loving them?<font>\_

\_Maybe... I just cried out of pure selfishness, out of inconvenience\_

><em><font><font>that they wouldn't be there any more.... but... that's evil, isn't it?<font>\_

\_If I had been a proper daughter and known what to do, would you\_

><em><font><font>have died of that fever?<font>\_

\_Didn't even go to your funeral...\_

She willed tears to gather in her dry eyes and course down her cheeks,

><font><font>for the knot inside her to be vomited up.<font>

\_I hate Kalm. I should be in Wutai. Kalm doesn't.. doesn't smell of\_

><em><font><font>my father, doesn't smell of the cherry trees that would be blossoming,<font>\_

><em><font><font>doesn't smell like the dust on Da Chao

-<font>\_

Yuffie swore and kicked the pillow to the other end of the room.

><font><font>"This is no damn time to become a poet, Yuffie," she hissed harshly to herself.<font>

><font><font>She stood and looked up into the mirror on the

wall.<font>  
><font><font>"Gawd, I look like a mess."<font>

Her short, choppy bob was everywhere, up in the air, making her

><font><font>look insane. Her light black eyes were dull and her skin  
dusty and blotchy -<font>  
><font><font>When was the last time I bathed? Putting all these  
things together,<font>  
><font><font>she looked like hell. <em>Gah, I barely look female. I  
barely look human!<em>

She grabbed a towel and poked her head out the door.

"Tifa! I'm having a bath, is that okay?"

"Sure," floated up the reply. "Good morning, Yuffie! Cloud, I hope

><font><font>you cleaned up from the last time you bathed, otherwise  
there are<font>  
><font><font>going to be all these little hairs dotted around the tu  
-<font>

"Ti-fa!"

"It's true! I do not know how one man can accumulate so

><font><font>much dirt and hair! Are you slowly going  
bald?"<font>

Yuffie smiled and went into the bathroom. She liked the playful

><font><font>teasing going on between those two. They weren't  
married,<font>  
><font><font>she doubted they ever would be. Tifa may have held a  
torch<font>  
><font><font>for Cloud, but he held a forest fire for Aeris. And  
Aeris was dead,<font>  
><font><font>so all they could ever be was the close brother-sister  
relationship<font>  
><font><font>they held now.<font>

She sighed, depressed now. "Is nobody in this world happy?" she

><font><font>muttered to herself, turning on the water. She pulled  
off her<font>  
><font><font>dirty vest and shorts - <em>must burn those, I've been  
wearing them<em>  
><font><font><em>for what, three years now? <em>- and looked at  
herself critically in  
><font><font>the mirror as she loosened her bindings.<em> Ugh...  
Ug-leeeee.<em>

She unwrapped a purple bandanna from her head and jumped

><font><font>into the running water with a sigh. It felt so good,  
cleansing,<font>  
><font><font>making her feel alive instead of a dead weight.<font>

><font><font>Yuffie relaxed a little while, then fervently rinsed the

dirt of<font>  
><font><font>her journey from her trip. She had staggered in last  
night,<font>  
><font><font>with only about two baths from Wutai to Kalm,  
exhausted<font>  
><font><font>but not feeling it properly.<font>

She cleaned her hair, feeling a little happier and refreshed.

><font><font>After a careful cleansing of the bath, not wanting to  
be<font>  
><font><font>another Cloud, Yuffie dumped her clothes in the laundry  
basket<font>  
><font><font>and hurried into her room, wrapped in a towel. She felt  
shy<font>  
><font><font>and awkward being in a house with lots of people - back  
in Wutai,<font>  
><font><font>she could walk around naked all day singing striptease  
songs.<font>

\_Hey, I did that once\_, she realized. \_When I got into my father's\_

><font><font><em>sake last year..laugh, remembering  
><font><font>her hangover. Wishing she was back there, with Godo to  
tell<font>  
><font><font>her off the next day...<font>

Yuffie opened her knapsack and removed her clothing. Ninety

><font><font>percent of the garments were fighting gear. Then she  
had<font>  
><font><font>some underwear, a nightie covered in Mogs, and one  
dress.<font>  
><font><font>She ran her hands over it lovingly. Tifa had given this  
to her<font>  
><font><font>last year, her first grown-up dress. It reached a little  
above<font>  
><font><font>the knee and was pale blue, spaghetti straps with a  
modest<font>  
><font><font>neckline. <em>My first real dress... at twenty-one?<em>

><em><font><font>That's pretty pathetic, Yuffie Kisaragi.<font>\_

She pulled underwear on, thought about the bindings then

><font><font>recklessly pulled on her dress without them. Yuffie  
wasn't<font>  
><font><font>fighting now, and there was no Gorkii or Shake to  
remonstrate<font>  
><font><font>her about flopping. It wasn't like she had anything to  
flop,<font>  
><font><font>anyway.<font>

She left her room and bumped into Cloud, who gave a very

><font><font>fake wolf-whistle. "Lookin' good!"<font>

Yuffie rolled her eyes at him. "Spare me. What's the  
time?"

"Roundabout eleven, but there must be some breakfast

><font><font>left somewhere. Tifa's gone to the bar, left a little while<font>  
><font><font>after you bathed."<font>

"Okay. Eleven? Gawd, I slept in."

"You're allowed to. Don't worry." Cloud looked at her.

><font><font>"You know, Yuffie, if you ever feel really really bad...<font>  
><font><font>you can talk to me."<font>

"I know." \_Don't remind me. Don't remind me I have a\_

><em><font><font>reason to talk to you. I want to forget.<font>\_

"Okay." His face cleared. "Shall we see what's  
><font><font>here for breakfast?"<font>

He chatted to her on the way down. Yuffie couldn't

><font><font>remember the last time he was this talkative. He told her<font>  
><font><font>that Barret and Cid and Shera and Red were coming down<font>  
><font><font>for the summer festival and they were trying to get Reeve,<font>  
><font><font>too, but he was pretty busy in Junon so they didn't know.<font>

"Geez, Cloud," she broke in. "When did you get so perky?"

He smiled easily at her. "I'm just.. content here, I guess.

><font><font>Found my niche."<font>

"You own the weapons and armoury shops and stuff, right?"

><font><font>"Co-own."<font>

"Oh. Who's the co-owner?"

Cloud looked at her curiously, then smiled, eyes twinkling.

><font><font>"Oh.. just a nice guy. Really cute. Maybe we could set you up with him."<font>

Yuffie rolled her eyes. "Please. I'm not desperate."

"I know, I know! It was a joke." He patted her damp hair

><font><font>and rifled around in the pantry. "Want a drink?"<font>

"Water, thanks." She sat herself down at the oaken table

><font><font>in the sunny living room and looked out the window.  
"Nice day."<font>

"Yup. I only have to be at work in a couple of hours, so

><font><font>I can show you around town."<font>

"Thanks," Yuffie said softly and stretched as the kettle boiled.

><font><font>She hadn't worn a dress in ages, and it made her  
feel...<font>

><font><font>grown up, in a silly way. She could feel how her body  
had<font>

><font><font>matured, and how her hair had grown to brush the back  
of<font>

><font><font>her neck. Yuffie liked it.<font>

Cloud smiled at her as he sat down with a mug and a glass of water.

><font><font>"I meant the looking-good part. Have you had a  
boyfriend?"<font>

She grinned and sipped her drink. "Closest thing I've ever had

><font><font>is little Hoshi in Wutai. We were six. He was playing  
mothers<font>

><font><font>and fathers with me and tried to kiss me, so I punched  
him<font>

><font><font>in the gut. Not too romantic."<font>

"Hah, sounds kind of like me." Cloud brewed his tea,

><font><font>then added more sugar.<font>

Yuffie sipped a little more, then gulped. "Cloud... do you..

><font><font>miss Aeris still... lots?" <em>Ugh, I sound so  
stupid.<em>

A shadow of unhappiness passed over his face.

><font><font>"Yeah... I do... I have nightmares about it  
sometimes,<font>

><font><font>but other times..." his eyes became dreamy. "She  
tells<font>

><font><font>me that we'll be together one day. In the  
Lifestream.<font>

><font><font>So... I'm looking forward to that."<font>

There was silence, but it was a comfortable one as

><font><font>they both mulled over the dead  
Cetra.<font>

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> <p>

Yuffie liked Kalm after she had walked around it with Cloud.

><font><font>It had merit; it wasn't Wutai and she had never been

there with Godo.<font>

After a while, Cloud had left to go to his weaponry and she had

><font><font>walked around, sniffing the fresh air and sighing to herself.<font>

><font><font>Nobody knew her here, which explained the wolf-whistles<font>

><font><font>she got when she entered Tifa's bar and the pinch on the<font>

><font><font>rear she recieved from one particularly brave barfly.<font>

"Hey! Hands off," Tifa yelled. "This lady is a respectable one, Kief!"

"And I'm showin' my appreciation for her," Kief said,

><font><font>winking at an amused Yuffie.<font>

"I'm sure your girlfriend would be interested in your appreciation

><font><font>of her," Tifa snorted and turned to the ninja. "Had a good time?"<font>

"Yep." Yuffie sat down on a stool and smiled. "Nice bar."

"Yeah, it's better than the original Seventh Heaven." The long-haired

><font><font>woman smiled and wiped a glass. "Marlene tended the drinks<font>

><font><font>half of the time, because we were on missions."<font>

"But she must have been about four!" Yuffie blinked.

"And she made a damn good martini. Want a drink?"

"Water, please. I can't hold alcohol at the moment."

"Water comin' up." Tifa quickly handed her a glass full of the stuff,

><font><font>which she absently sipped. "Cloud show you his shop?"<font>

"Nope." Yuffie smiled at the bartender. "We were too busy

><font><font>being accosted by all the men."<font>

"Hah! They see one piece of new skirt and they're all over her."

><font><font>Tifa looked at the ninja in front of her, then got an odd gleam in<font>

><font><font>her eyes. "Maybe you should start looking for a guy to throw them off."<font>

She sipped again. "Of course! Yuffie is in the department to

><font><font>look for a man! Can anybody find me somebody to looove?"<font>



><font><font>Yuffie chuckled. "Don't be silly, Tifa. I bet you the men were<font>  
><font><font>after Cloud or something."<font>

Tifa crossed her arms and leaned on her bench. "You know,

><font><font>Yuffs, I think I know just who to set you up with."<font>

Yuffie groaned. "I was kidding!"

"No, wait! This guy needs a bit of companionship. At least

><font><font>become friends? He's the co-owner with Cloud."<font>

"Oh, yes, Cloud already suggested I date him." Yuffie gulped down

><font><font>the last of her water. "Okay. What've I got to lose?"<font>

It'll take my mind off everything, at least.

"Great! I'll set you up sometime." Tifa chuckled to herself

><font><font>and took Yuffie's glass. "You'll be friends, if nothing else."<font>

She shrugged, gave a little wave to Tifa and left. Tifa was

><font><font>acting awfully strange about this whole deal.<font>

\_He'll turn out to be eighty and bald. Or fifteen and all hyperactive.\_

><em><font><font><strong>Kind of like you were back at that age, eh, Yuffie?<strong> Oh, shut\_  
><em><font><font>up, brain. Geez.<font>\_

Yuffie went back to Cloud's house, flopped down on her bed

><font><font>and immediately forgot about the whole thing as the now-familiar<font>

><font><font>knot of pain clenched inside her.<font>

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> <p>

Tifa set Anton to watch over the bar as she jogged out her

><font><font>bar to the weapon shop, an evil grin on her face. She slowed<font>

><font><font>as she entered the door and gave an innocent, twinkling smile<font>

><font><font>to the proprietor.<font>

"Vincent! Just the person I wanted to see."

Vincent Valentine looked at Tifa curiously and put down

><font><font>the sword he was so carefully polishing. "What is wrong?"<font>

Tifa scuffled her shoe on the floor and her smile got even

><font><font>bigger. "Nothing's wrong," she said innocently.<font>

The tall, dark-haired man knew that look and stood up. "What do

><font><font>you need, Tifa?" he asked with a sigh.<font>

"Why, Vincent! For shame!" She leant against the counter and

><font><font>gave him her most wide-eyed look. "Well, you see, a friend<font>

><font><font>I know has just come into town, and.."<font>

"No."

"Vincent." Her brown eyes became pleading. "Just one night.

><font><font>She's really sweet, and wants to meet you so much, and -"<font>

"Tifa, how many times do I have to say no?" He sat down

><font><font>again abruptly and picked up his sword again.<font>

"I don't want you to really date her. Just take her somewhere

><font><font>and make her happy..."<font>

Vincent raised an eyebrow at her. "Tifa, I do not believe I am

><font><font>capable of making someone I have just met 'happy'."<font>

She pulled out her last trump card. "Her father just died."

"..." The black-wearing man stopped polishing for a moment

><font><font>and closed his eyes. "How long ago?"<font>

"Three weeks."

A faint shadow of pain passed over his face. Probably thinking

><font><font>about Lucrecia. "The hurt must be great. Please send my<font>

><font><font>sympathies, but..."<font>

"Vincent, if you do this for me, I promise I'll never try to set

><font><font>you up with anyone ever again!"<font>

He rubbed his temples, weighing the merits of yes and no in

><font><font>his mind. "All right," he said finally. "But not too long. And<font>

><font><font>strictly friendship," he warned her.<font>

Tifa vaulted over the counter and hugged him tight. "Oh,

><font><font>Vincent, thank you! Thank you! I - "<font>

"Go back to your bar, Tifa."

She nodded obediently and vaulted back, a big smile on her face.

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> <p>

"Tifa, I'm not wearing that."

"Yes, you are."

"Tifa Lockheart." Yuffie turned around and pressed her

><font><font>hands over the neckline of the dress. "If I bend over, I'm<font>

><font><font>going to flop out."<font>

"You look good in it."

"Yeah, right." Yuffie snorted, pulled the dress off and

><font><font>grabbed vainly at another dress. "See, blue. My colour."<font>

Tifa groaned. "That's the dress you were wearing before!"

"It's perfect." Yuffie wriggled it over her head. "See, fine."

"It's boring."

"It's me!"

Tifa rolled her eyes and checked the clock. "You have about

><font><font>ten minutes, go brush your hair."<font>

"Yes, ma'am!" Yuffie gave Tifa a silly salute and marched

><font><font>off to the bathroom.<font>

Cloud sidled past the ninja as she made her way past and hissed

><font><font>in Tifa's ear. "Why on earth did you set her up with Vincent,<font>

><font><font>of all people?! They have nothing in common. It's... it's Vincent.<font>

><font><font>And it's Yuffie... And it's Vincent, and Yuffie. And she probably<font>

><font><font>thinks he's weird, and he'll think she's as annoying as -"<font>

Tifa grinned at him mischievously. "So are you saying they

><font><font>won't get together?"<font>

"Not in a million years."

Of course not. But it's fun trying. "Hah, I bet you they will."

"Okay." Cloud lit up. "If they don't, you have to make me

><font><font>breakfast for the rest of the year."<font>

"And if they do, you have to do the washing up for the

><font><font>rest of the year."<font>

"Done!" They shook hands fiercely as Tifa smiled benevolently

><font><font>at him. "You don't eat breakfast anyway."<font>

"I'll start if I win!"

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> <p>

Yuffie smoothed her dress self-consciously down to her

><font><font>mid-thigh and gazed at her reflection in the mirror. She<font>

><font><font>didn't know what to think of herself; the only times she<font>

><font><font>had really looked in a mirror before was to check how many<font>

><font><font>good places there were to stuff materia down her clothes.<font>

"Are you done yet?"

"I'm going, I'm going!" Yuffie opened the door and rushed

><font><font>past Tifa, anxious to leave as soon as possible before Tifa<font>

><font><font>started giving her pointers. "See, I'm gone!"<font>

"Yuffie!"

Yuffie smiled to herself as she darted out the house.

><font><font>This date was going to be horrendous, she knew,<font>

><font><font>but it might be fun in some perverse way.<font>

She looked up at the night sky. It was beautiful; a

><font><font>dark velvet blue frosted with stars.<font>

\_I wish I could fly. Then I could be up there instead of\_

><em><font><font>embarrassing myself in front of Cloud and Tifa's friend.<font>\_

Yuffie slowly trudged up the stairs of Kalm and opened

><font><font>the door of the weapons shop hesitantly. There was a<font>  
><font><font>candle at the back of the shop, flickering light on a dark<font>  
><font><font>figure working on a table at something.  
"Hello?"<font>

Then the figure looked at her and her jaw dropped open.  
> <p>

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Vincent blinked. "Hello?"

The girl in front of him blinked back, then strode forward.

"Vincent, don't you recognize me? It's me, Yuffie!"

"Yuffie...?" Vincent stood up and looked at her,  
><font><font>up and down. "You've grown."<font>

She blushed. "Yeah, probably sideways. Are you the co-

><font><font>owner of the weaponry?"<font>

"Yes. Are you Tifa's 'friend from out of town'?"

Yuffie sighed and nodded. "Yes. I am so going to kill her...

><font><font>Gawdâ€¦ I'll leave now, and not -"<font>

He caught her arm gently and shook his head. "It's... your

><font><font>father who died?"<font>

"Yes..."

"Godo..." Vincent looked almost dreamy for a moment,

><font><font>then snapped back. "I am so very sorry, Yuffie. He was<font>  
><font><font>a strong man and makes me think about my own mortality."<font>

What mortality? She swung herself up on the counter.

><font><font>"You met him? I thought it was only Cloud and Aeris who<font>  
><font><font>came to Wutai."<font>

Vincent sat down in a chair again and nodded. "Yes, but...

><font><font>I met him before."<font>

"As a Turk?"

"As a child."

She blinked again. "What..?"

"I am a Wutaian, born and bred." His eyebrows quirked.

><font><font>"I was a little older than Godo, but we grew up together  
-<font>  
><font><font>as I recall, he was an extremely bossy boy. He once  
tied<font>  
><font><font>me up from the head of one of the statues and left  
me<font>  
><font><font>dangling next to the nose. Afterwards, though, he gave  
me<font>  
><font><font>one of his best knives and that was that." A dry  
chuckle<font>  
><font><font>escaped his lips.<font>

Yuffie looked at him with wide eyes. "Vincent Valentine isn't a

><font><font>Wutaian name."<font>

"My father was from Mideel. My mother - Ayami - was wed

><font><font>to him there and they moved back to her hometown. As  
I<font>  
><font><font>recall, our house was almost directly left of the  
entrance.<font>  
><font><font>That, however, was before the war."<font>

Yuffie mapped out Wutai in her mind. "Where the armoury now

><font><font>is, I bet. How come you didn't tell me  
before?"<font>

He shrugged. "It did not cross my mind to."

Yuffie jumped down off the counter and bowed to him gracefully.

><font><font>"Konnichiwa, Vincent-sempai," she greeted him, her black  
eyes laughing.<font>

He stood up in front of her and graced her with a fluid bow in  
return.

><font><font>"Konnichiwa, Yuffie-san," he said gravely.<font>

Yuffie scuffed her sandalled foot on the floor in much the

><font><font>same way Tifa had. "Want to go for a walk?" she asked,  
half-shy.<font>

Vincent looked at her, an almost amused tone to his eyes.

><font><font><em>This isn't the Yuffie I knew, is it? <em>"Hai. That  
would be... very nice."

He fatherly slipped his arm through hers and led her outside the

shop.

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> <p>

Two figures lay on the roof of the armoury in peaceful silence.

><font><font>Vincent was slightly awed. The Yuffie he had known had  
abhorred<font>  
><font><font>silence like it was  
poisonous.<font>

"Yuffie.."

"Mmm-hmm?"

Vincent rolled onto his hip. "How... did Godo die?"

"Sickness, what else?" Yuffie folded up her arms.

><font><font>"Funny, isn't it. He broke both his legs and got the  
infection<font>  
><font><font>and he lived. He was shot in the stomach and he  
lived.<font>  
><font><font>Then he gets a cold and..." she clicked her  
fingers.<font>  
><font><font>"Whoof. That's that."<font>

"He was old, Yuffie."

"Old!" she cried out. "Old my ass! He was going to  
><font><font>go on forever."<font>

"Nobody goes on forever, Yuffie," replied a soft whisper.

She rolled onto her stomach, looking down at her hands.

><font><font>"I guess."<font>

"You run Wutai now."

Yuffie laughed, mirthlessly. "Lady Kisaragi! I don't think so.

><font><font>Gorkii can do it. I couldn't run anything if my life  
depended on it."<font>

Vincent moved onto his back again. "If you have no faith

><font><font>in yourself, then I doubt you are suited for the  
job."<font>

"Oh, thank you for your faith in me. What about Godo?"

"He wasn't a leader, either."

Yuffie glared at him. "Godo was a good leader!"

He shrugged. "I suppose he eventually melded to it.

><font><font>He didn't expect to become one as a child. He...

had<font>  
><font><font>dreams of other things.." It must have been a trick  
of<font>  
><font><font>the light, but the corners of Vincent's mouth turned up  
slightly.<font>

"So, what are you going to do in Kalm?"

Yuffie shrugged. "Hang around, clean up Cloud's house,  
><font><font>feel like a dead weight, etcetera."<font>

"You... may always come and help in the weaponry, if

><font><font>you wish..." Why am I suggesting that? I don't wish  
for<font>  
><font><font>company.<font>

"Thanks, Vincent." Yuffie curled up on the roof, shivering

><font><font>slightly. "S'cold."<font>

"You'd better go home."

"You going, too?"

"...maybe later."

"G'night then, Vince." Yuffie bounded down from the roof

><font><font>before he could protest at the  
nickname.<font>

"Wait."

Yuffie turned her head slightly.

"Do you miss Godo, Yuffie?"

Suddenly her palms felt all slick and shaky. "Gawd, who'd miss him,"

><font><font>she said loudly. "He must have been the worst father who  
ever lived."<font>

Then she ran home.

---

> <p>

Vincent lay on the tiles of his roof, looking up at the sky long  
after  
><font><font>Yuffie had gone, thinking his own thoughts, his eyes  
closed.<font>

As much as he tried to quell them, visions danced through his  
head.

\_"Hah, when I grow up, I'm going to marry Michiko," Godo boasted.\_

><em><font><font>"And she's going to give me twenty daughters, thirty



sons, and -"<font>\_

\_"And ten dogs?" Vincent chuckled. "And Michiko would even look at you?"\_

\_"She will, Vin," fourteen-year-old Godo said confidently. They were lying in\_

><em><font><font>a blossoming cherry tree, on different branches.

"After all, who couldn't fall<font>\_

><em><font><font>in love with the magnificent Godo?"<font>\_

\_Vincent's gentle smirk evolved into a slow grin. "Well, you never know,\_

><em><font><font>Godo... after all, there is always the chance she may go blind and deaf."<font>\_

\_With a yell, Godo chased Vincent out of the tree.\_

> <p>

\_She's so like him...\_

Michiko had died in childbirth with Yuffie, he'd heard that much.

><font><font>Vincent allowed himself a pang of grief. She always had been a sweet girl;<font>

><font><font>he was amazed she'd fallen in love with his childhood friend. Not that<font>

><font><font>he was ever interested in her; he'd never thought he'd fall in love until...<font>

Her...

His features hardening again, Vincent slipped off his roof and

><font><font>walked inside his shop.<font>

---

> <p>

"G'morning!"

Vincent, unlocking the door of his weaponry, opened the

><font><font>door fully and nodded, slightly surprised. "...good morning,<font>

><font><font>Yuffie. I assume you slept well?"<font>

"Like a log." Yuffie - clad in tight black shorts and a white

><font><font>top that was more than entertaining for the morning male<font>

><font><font>population of Kalm - bounced up the stairs and smiled at<font>

><font><font>Vincent widely. "You?"<font>

"I stayed up late to finish a spearhead at the last moment.

><font><font>However, I am used to late nights."<font>

"What, all the parties?" Yuffie joked lamely.

Vincent shook his head and grabbed a nearby broom, silently

><font><font>sweeping out his doorstep. "What are you here for, so early in<font>

><font><font>the morning? The materia shop?"<font>

She snorted derisively. "Come onnn... Gawd, I could

><font><font>restock them about ten times!"<font>

The corner of Vincent's mouth turned up. This was old Yuffie.

><font><font>"So I gather you have not stolen from them..."<font>

"Well, my last Heal got lost, so..."

"...yet..."

"Anyway! I was wondering if I could take you up for help in

><font><font>the shop?" At Vincent's raised eyebrow, Yuffie continued<font>

><font><font>hurriedly. "Only it's so boring at Tifa's, I think I actually started<font>

><font><font>to clean her kitchen before I realized what I was doing, and I<font>

><font><font>thought 'Hey, my wonderful good pal Vincent will need some<font>

><font><font>help with his shop..' "<font>

His mouth quirked again. "You'll have to work."

"I can do that."

"You can't steal anything."

"What, I'm going to hide some guns down my shorts?"

\_I wouldn't put it past you in a pinch.\_ "I don't like being

><font><font>disturbed when I'm finishing off the weapons."<font>

"I'll just dust and stuff like that, and talk to customers, and

><font><font>not get in your way... please?" she wheedled.<font>

He handed the broom to her silently.

"Yay!" Yuffie giggled and began to waltz with the broom.

Cloud walked up the stairs to the armoury and inserted his

><font><font>key into the lock on the door. "You're certainly perky this morning,"<font>

><font><font>he commented. Then he smirked at both of them. "Nice date?"<font>

She nodded, putting on a serious face. "I've found my one

><font><font>true love from it... this broom." Yuffie bent the broom over<font>  
><font><font>and began making fake kissing noises over it.<font>

"Seems like she's back to her normal self," Cloud told Vincent.

><font><font>"We knew it couldn't last..."<font>

"Hey!" Yuffie pouted, straightened up the broom and began sweeping.

><font><font>"Can't I lose control of reality sometimes?"<font>

"Well, you've had your quota for the day. If you like, you can

><font><font>sweep my doorstep too," he added generously.<font>

"Thanks, Cloud, for your thoughtfulness."

Vincent shook his head and went inside the weaponry.

Yuffie followed soon after and just stood in the middle of the

><font><font>shop for a moment, looking around. The walls were decorated<font>  
><font><font>with large, delicately crafted sabres and axes and rifles; the<font>  
><font><font>smaller knives, pistols, gloves and throwing stars were kept<font>  
><font><font>inside a case at the front. A rack of shiny staves and spears<font>  
><font><font>was pushed against the right wall, and another of shuriken<font>  
><font><font>was at the left. Yuffie examined them for a moment with a<font>  
><font><font>critical eye, then proudly thought of her Conformer in her<font>  
><font><font>closet back in Tifa's house. The whole room smelt of polish<font>  
><font><font>and metal and paint, and gleamed dull silver. And as well as<font>  
><font><font>being useful, Vincent's weapons had a finesse Yuffie seldom<font>  
><font><font>saw.<font>

"Did you make all of this?"

Vincent looked up from behind the counter, cleaning a sword.

><font><font>"Most of it... I had the heavier things casted elsewhere, however."<font>

"They're beautiful," Yuffie said admiringly.

"Weapons are not supposed to be beautiful. They are..."

><font><font>instruments of destruction."<font>

Yuffie ran her finger carefully over some intricate engravings

><font><font>in a sword-hilt. "It doesn't stop some of them from being works<font>

><font><font>of art."<font>

"I suppose..." Vincent held the sword up to the light critically.

><font><font>"Can you place this in the empty holder to the far left?"<font>

She took it wordlessly, carrying it as if it was made of glass,

><font><font>and placed it lovingly on the wooden pegs. It made something<font>

><font><font>inside Vincent smile, which startled him momentarily.<font>

"Hey, Vincent, did you manage to work out how that shield was

><font><font>cast?" Cloud had popped his head through the doorway behind<font>

><font><font>the counter that led to his armoury.<font>

He shook his head. "No, but someone did not roll the mythril properly..."

><font><font>it's of bad quality; I suggest you complain."<font>

"Damn, damn." Cloud sighed, then perked up, a too-innocent

><font><font>grin on his face. "You guys want tea or something?"<font>

"No," Vincent said, almost hurriedly.

"I'll have tea," Yuffie volunteered.\_ Geez, Vincent must really\_

><em><font><font>not like tea.<font>\_

Cloud nodded slightly viciously and left.

The dark-haired man cocked an eyebrow at Yuffie.

><font><font>"I gather you've never tasted Cloud's tea before?"<font>

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's very... strong."

"That's good! I like strong tea."

Cloud came out a few minutes later with two cups of steaming tea,

><font><font>one of which Yuffie gratefully cupped in her hands. Then she sipped<font>

><font><font>carefully, swilling the contents around in her mouth

like a wine-taster.<font>

"Tea leaves," she said after her second sip, then took another.  
"Milk.

><font><font>I detect sugar.. and paint-stripper."<font>

Cloud laughed goodnaturedly and held the tray out to her. "Put it back.

><font><font>Not even Vincent can stand it."<font>

"No, this is interesting! I swear, layers are peeling off my teeth."

><font><font>Yuffie winked at both of the men in front of her and flexed one of<font>

><font><font>her arms, holding the tea in the other. "And to test my strength,<font>

><font><font>I will drink the rest of the cup... one-handed!" She tipped her head<font>

><font><font>up and bravely tilted the rest of the liquid into her mouth.<font>

Cloud applauded and she put the empty cup back on the tray.

><font><font>"Brave girl," he commented and left the room.<font>

Yuffie grinned at Vincent and plonked herself down in a chair.

><font><font>"Now, what can I do?"<font>

For the next hour, they sat in silence, the only noise the one of a

><font><font>cloth loudly applying polish to various items of mythrill and steel.<font>

><font><font>There was the occasional 'ow' as Yuffie pricked herself, but other<font>

><font><font>than that, nothing.<font>

Eventually, she felt herself being watched, and looked

><font><font>up to see Vincent's crimson eyes on her. "What are you<font>

><font><font>looking at?" she asked, slightly joking, but also worried.<font>

><em><font><font>Have I broken something?<font>\_

"I was just thinking how you've changed, Yuffie."

\_That was a particularly long sentence for him\_, she immediately

><font><font>thought, but all joking was gone and seriousness settled over her,<font>

><font><font>familiarily now. "For the worse?"<font>

"I don't know..." Vincent settled down with a dagger and

><font><font>began carefully checking it. "You are most definitely less... perky."<font>

She blinked, surprised. Yuffie had tried to be as cheerful

><font><font>as possible all morning. "I am?"<font>

"Yes, no matter how hard you try." Almost as if reading

><font><font>her mind, he looked at her carefully. "You miss Godo."<font>

"Don't be stupid," she spat out, the knot tightening

><font><font>inside her and rebounding around her body before<font>

><font><font>she could stop it or the words.<font>

"..." Vincent shrugged, then flipped his dagger over.

Yuffie was trying to think up some suitable retort

><font><font>for silence when a customer came through the door.<font>

She cheered up later when Vincent let her take the till and

><font><font>she could gossip with everyone buying throwing-weapons.<font>

><font><font>Yuffie was good at counting change - she'd always made<font>

><font><font>careful count of how much people would miss in her younger<font>

><font><font>days - and Vincent trusted her with selling people stuff.<font>

><font><font>Occasionally he came to the fore when there was a question<font>

><font><font>of make, but other than that, Yuffie was left to herself.<font>

Later on in the day Vincent stood up and motioned for Yuffie

><font><font>to take the counter. "I need to retrieve some papers from my<font>

><font><font>house; I won't be long..."<font>

"Leave it to me, Vin," Yuffie said breezily. Vincent looked slightly

><font><font>sick at the nickname, but left.<font>

He returned quickly, only after about ten minutes, with a

><font><font>large stack of official-looking papers in his hands. Vincent<font>

><font><font>set them down on the counter and a smallish white square<font>

><font><font>slipped out onto the floor. Yuffie immediately snatched it.<font>

Once she saw what it was, she blushed slightly; it was a

><font><font>black and white photograph of a young man - a very<font>

><font><font>handsome young man - dressed in a dark business

suit<font>  
><font><font>and tie. His eyes were serious, his face carrying  
the<font>  
><font><font>same expression... Yuffie just knew that if he  
smiled,<font>  
><font><font>this man would be probably the most good-looking  
she'd<font>  
><font><font>ever seen...<font>

The photo slipped from her grasp when she realised  
><font><font>it was Vincent.<font>

She was scrabbling on the floor for it when she looked up at  
  
><font><font>Vincent, red-faced. Eventually it made it's way into  
her<font>  
><font><font>hands and she handed it back to him shyly. He took  
it<font>  
><font><font>delicately in his claw.<font>

"How old were you?"

He looked at the photo mutely. "... twenty-five,"  
><font><font>he finally offered.<font>

"You had really cute hair," Yuffie responded, then  
  
><font><font>prayed for the Planet to let her sink into it's  
depths.<em> Oh, no.<em>  
><em><font><font>Could I have sounded more like an idiot airhead?  
Gawd!<font>\_\_\_\_

Instead of a pitying look, a slight warmth touched his eyes.

><font><font>"No matter how much I combed it, it would not stay  
flat...<font>  
><font><font>it was my despair when I was younger." He ran a  
hand<font>  
><font><font>though his tumbling black locks. "Strange how one  
can<font>  
><font><font>become obsessed with such things during  
puberty."<font>

"You're lucky it was just your hair," Yuffie said gloomily.

><font><font>"I didn't grow properly until I was about fifteen years  
old."<font>

"I was small, too," he said unexpectedly. "Thin&#128| weedy."

><font><font>Vincent abruptly stopped for a moment, staring into  
space,<font>  
><font><font>then shook his head and slipped the photo into his  
pocket.<font>  
><font><font>"But it's all in the past now&#128|"<font>

\_All in the past now\_, Yuffie thought. Everything was all in the past  
now,  
><font><font>it seemed; everything that was good, and light, and  
happy.<font>

><font><font>The future held little comfort and everything just hurt so bad,<font>  
><font><font>so much that it seemed her heart was swollen in her chest and<font>  
><font><font>trying to explode.<font>

\_All in the past now\_, Vincent thought. Everyone that was important

><font><font>was merely past, and history, a turned page in the faded notebook<font>  
><font><font>that seemed to be his life. The years were long and dragging, and it<font>  
><font><font>seemed he didn't have a soul or a heart now, shrivelling in his chest<font>  
><font><font>until it dwindled away to nothing.<font>

They looked at each other and knew the other understood,

><font><font>so they turned different ways and Yuffie left to go home,<font>  
><font><font>because somebody else knowing was the most unnerving part.<font>

Yuffie's heart thudded in her chest as she raced down the steps

><font><font>to Cloud's house, and her one coherent thought was that she had<font>  
><font><font>to stop running away from Vincent like that.<font>

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> <p>

"Oh, so you can come, Barret?" Tifa gushed. "It'll be so great,

><font><font>Marlene and everything." There was a pause. "No, Reeve's in<font>  
><font><font>Junon, he'll be sendingâ€| oh, come on! He's not so badâ€|"<font>

Yuffie sat sipping her tea calmly that evening, Tifa using the

><font><font>PHS. Cloud was off somewhere doing complicated things with<font>  
><font><font>the plumbing.<font>

"Yes, Yuffie's here â€"

"Hi, Barret!" Yuffie shouted from the table from his benefit.

" â€" as you can hearâ€| It's a one-week thing, yesâ€| we'd

><font><font>love to have you with us!"<font>

Barret and Marlene, here, Yuffie thought. With a kind of ashamed

><font><font>affection she realized she'd like to see the big man and his little<font>  
><font><font>daughter again, that she'd like to see all the others and talk<font>



><font><font>and have fun and see if they'd changed. Foul-mouthed Cid and<font>  
><font><font>mousy Shera, intelligent Red. They did mean a lot to her, she<font>  
><font><font>realized. Even Cait, who'd looked more like something she'd<font>  
><font><font>have taken to bed as a child than a companion and fighter.<font>

Tifa hung up the PHS and smiled at Yuffie, breathing in the

><font><font>warm, slightly breezy air that signalled hot summer. It wasn't<font>  
><font><font>Costa del Sol, and it wasn't dead dry like Wutai, but it was<font>  
><font><font>a lovely, temperate summer. "Warming up. You like summer, Yuffie?"<font>

"I never really thought about it." She sipped her tea

><font><font>and smiled. "But I thinkâ€| autumn, definitely. Crunching<font>  
><font><font>leaves."<font>

Tifa began to pack away mats on the table from dinner.

><font><font>"At least you can decide. When it's spring, I tell myself it's<font>  
><font><font>my favourite; when it's autumn, I decide I like that best;<font>  
><font><font>and the same thing in winter. Now it's summer and I say<font>  
><font><font>that it's definitely my favourite season!" Her laughter<font>  
><font><font>was silvery and she closed a drawer. "I'm silly."<font>

"No, I like that," Yuffie said, oddly charmed by the description.

><font><font>"It means you're happy the whole year round." She shook<font>  
><font><font>her head and looked up. "When's Barret coming?"<font>

"Two weeks, Red as wellâ€| a few days before the festival."

"When is theâ€| Midsummer Festival?"

"Two weeks; we'll be decorating a week before then,

><font><font>though. Everywhere you look, there'll be red and<font>

><font><font>yellow streamers and posters and â€""<font>

"Cheap cardboard?"

Tifa snorted. "Okay, it does look a little tacky. But it's fun;

><font><font>there's always dancingâ€|"<font>

"Dancing?" Yuffie looked horrified. "Likeâ€¦ waltz, and all that?"

"Yeahâ€¦" Tifa smiled wistfully and placed her hands

><font><font>on an invisible partner, humming to herself and waltzing<font>  
><font><font>lightly around the table.<font>

The ninja grinned and clapped for the other dark-haired

><font><font>woman as she ended her dance and bowed to the unseen<font>  
><font><font>person opposite her.<font>

Immediately Cloud, who had been quietly watching from the door,

><font><font>cut between Tifa and her invisible partner. "My dance, if you please!"<font>  
><font><font>he winked.<font>

"Cloud.."

"Can't I waltz with one of the beautiful women in this house?" He grabbed

><font><font>her lightly and began twirling her around, as she laughed and<font>  
><font><font>wrapped her arms around him, head on his shoulder. Yuffie could<font>  
><font><font>see the wet shine to her eyes.<font>

She grinned softly and excused herself, moving out the

><font><font>door and up the stairs to her room.<font>

Things were starting to make her happy again, even if it

><font><font>was just a little.<font>

---

\_End Part One\_

## 2. Part Two

Vincent dreamt.

\_ Metal-shod feet trudged through the dust of the catacombs and opened a  
> wooden door. A face swathed in cloth ignored the scent of the dead  
and<br> closed the door behind him as he walked to the place of sleep. With  
> little difficulty, he pushed past the heavy coffin lid and looked<br> inside the place he would spend the rest of his life in.\_

\_ It wasn't too appealing. \_

\_ He nodded grimly to himself and slowly lowered himself down - until

> something grabbed him so hard by his cape that he almost toppled  
<br> backwards. Vincent quickly righted himself and stared behind him  
in  
> disbelief. "Gawd! And here was I thinking 'Nooo, Vincent's smarter  
than that.'<br> What the hell do you think you're doing?" \_

\_ For once, he was at a loss as he stared at the small, dark- haired  
> figure behind him. "I... I thought you were going to Wutai," he  
<br> finished, half-lamely.\_

\_ "I followed you first. Hmph! You promised us all you wouldn't do  
this!" \_

\_ "I did not promise anything." Vincent stood up straight and stared  
> down at Yuffie. "Why are you here?" <em>

\_ "Cloud promised me his Quadra materia to make sure you were safe.  
And  
> safe doesn't mean going back into this box!" <em>

\_ "Yuffie." He looked at her. "Where else is there for me to go?  
Everyone  
> is gone." <em>

\_ "Aeris is gone from Cloud and you don't see him climbing into a  
coffin!  
> Stop feeling so.. so sorry for yourself," she said, her eyes  
flashing.<em>

\_ Vincent sighed, then turned away. "What must I do to make you leave  
me  
> alone?" <em>

\_ "Just... go somewhere, get a new life. Let us know you're alive!  
And  
> stay away from Nibelheim," she added as an afterthought. "It  
stinks<br> here. Where's the key to this crypt?" \_

\_ He handed it to her hesitantly. \_

\_ Yuffie opened her vest and dropped it down into her bindings.  
"There.  
> Just in case you tried to steal it. If you don't contact one of us  
each<br> month, I'm coming back here and setting fire to the  
mansion." \_

\_ "Yes, Yuffie," he said, quietly obedient to the fire in her eyes.  
\_

\_ It must have been a mastered Quadra materia.  
><em> \_\_\_\_\_

Yuffie groaned and threw down what seemed like her millionth  
streamer.  
> "I hate these things!"<p>

Cloud grinned and threw some more crepe paper at the ninja. "Just a

few  
> more!" <p>

"You said a few more ten minutes ago! Do you know how many trees died  
> to give us these streamers?!"<p>

"They went to a good cause." Cloud taped the ends of two together,  
then  
> hopped up on his ladder to fix them on the grating outside his  
house. A<br> few other people were also attaching the gaudy things to  
their own  
> houses; Yuffie thought it looked like somebody had vomited red,  
yellow <br> and orange all over their roof.

Yet she laughed and passed up some more streamers to him. "Are we  
> done?" <p>

He stuck his tongue between his lips and carefully taped them  
together,  
> then nodded, satisfied. "There! That's those down."<p>

Yuffie immediately began dancing in circles, throwing crepe paper  
> everywhere. <p>

"Don't upset those too much, we still have to do my shop and  
> Vincent's!"<p>

"Vinnie does Solar?" she mock-gasped.

"Nah. He comes out once, and then we don't see him until everything's  
> cleaned up." Cloud hopped off the ladder. "Can't blame him, I  
always<br> seem to have a hangover by the end of it."

"Hangover sounds nice," she said wistfully, then she blinked. "Oh,  
man!  
> I'm s'posed to be helping him!" <p>

She dropped her crepe and began sprinting to his shop, yelling a few  
> 'be right back!'s. For the last weeks, she'd been there at least  
every<br> day; she enjoyed it. She enjoyed working with the beautiful  
weapons he  
> made, and she enjoyed every tiny smile she could make Vincent  
give;<br> they were worth so much more than other people's.

And if sometimes conversation was strained, so what?

"You may go back and prepare your decorations," Vincent said  
patiently  
> to her. <p>

"Don't want to. Sure there isn't anything here I can do?"

"Positive, Yuffie."

She pouted, then her face cleared a little. "Will you go to the Solar

> Festival this year?" <p>

Vincent actually managed to look a little guilty. "Why do you want me  
> to?"<p>

"Cause I can't dance and I want to talk to somebody while I watch  
> Tifa'n all that," she said cheerily.<p>

There. The quirk to his lips. "I'm sure you can dance."

"Nuh-uh! I can't! I trip over my feet!" Suddenly an idea passed into  
> her head and her eyes got a sudden gleam, one that Vincent  
recognized -<br> it had come whenever the little ninja had seen  
materia. "Buuuuutâ€|"

A sinking feeling settled in his stomach. "Yes?"

"If you teach me, I'll leave you alone," Yuffie said coyly.

He really needed to finish that staff, and Vincent knew that if he  
> refused Yuffie would start annoying him incessantly in vengeance  
until<br> he complied. "Can't Tifa teach you?"

"Vincent, she's about five inches taller than me. I know what my eye  
> level would be forced to. Puleease?" Her brown eyes got big and<br>  
pleading.

A sigh, and he vaulted over the counter. Yuffie bounced happily and  
> smoothed down her short skirt and blouse, feeling pleased and  
young. <p>

"What do you wish to learn?"

"The waltz? That looks easiest," she guessed.

Vincent nodded his assent. "It is. All you need to learn is the  
simple  
> box-step." <p>

After five minutes of fumbling with her feet as he showed her how,

> standing at her side, not participating too much but gently  
offering<br> instructions, she got the hang of it. After all, she had  
danced beforeâ€|  
> Yuffie had just decided to gloss over every Wutai dance she'd  
ever<br> learnt.

Finally, Vincent stepped in front of her and he hesitantly looked at

> his claw and her waist, before placing it there as lightly as he  
could.<br> Her other hand touched his and eagerly took it between her  
fingers; his  
> touch was strangely cool and warm at the same time, with as  
little<br> moisture as possible. She was staring at his ribs, seeing  
as he was

> about six-feet and she five-feet-two, but she didn't  
mind.<p>

After a lot of hesitation, she practiced the step, him leading  
> silently, the rhythm stamped on the wooden floor echoing through  
the<br> room. Yuffie quickly got used to it and grinned at him  
cockily.

Vincent disentangled himself from her as quickly as possible. "Are  
you  
> satisfied?"<p>

She looked up at his deep, fathomless crimson eyes, bubbles  
> of euphoria popping up inside her as she realized how close she was  
to<br> him. Yuffie didn't dwell on it, she just knew she was happy.  
These  
> days, that was a feeling almost never truly felt, so she didn't  
really<br> want to look the gift chocobo in the mouth, so to speak.

Her right foot drew angular to her left and she suddenly struck a  
> graceful pose, one hand splayed in front of her face and the  
other<br> above her head in the ancient dance step all Wutaians were  
taught. "I  
> may live," she joked. <p>

Like a flash he mirrored her position, feet apart, eyes suddenly  
> intense in remembrance.<p>

Slowly she moved the hand above her head and just as slowly he copied  
> her. Then, when their hands were stretched as high as they could  
be,<br> his fingers clicked a slow-beating rhythm.

Her own rhythm joined in counterpoint and almost unconsciously her  
free  
> hand reached out - <p>

Vincent pulled back like he had stepped into a fire, and a faint  
flush  
> came over his face, deeply shamed. "I am sorry, Yuffie." <p>

She stared. "For? Gawd, it's not like you hit me! It's only a Wutaiian  
> Daini - " <p>

"No." He shook his head fervently, interrupting. "I shouldn't be  
> dancing, I shouldn't have even agreedâ€¦|"<p>

"It's not illegal," Yuffie protested. \_What\_ was his problem? He  
hadn't  
> been that bad at all. <p>

He muttered something and pushed past her, not rough but firm, back  
> into the deep recesses of his shop.<p>

The tiny ninja stared at him before shaking her head and stalking out  
> the shop, murmuring dirty words in frustration. Really, Vincent<br>

Valentine was impossible.

> \_\_\_\_\_ <p>

The last red streamer pinned, the last yellow flower lovingly tucked

> away in some niche. Kalm was decorated for the Solar Festival. Yes, it<br> was the tacky eye-hurting riot that Yuffie had fearedâ€|  
butâ€| the festive

> air appealed to the still-excited child in her. The weather was now hot<br> and dry, and Yuffie was in her element, used to the deadly in

> comparison Wutai summers. <p>

Tifa, however, was always found in her bar with the fan on high or

> trying to find the coolest room of her house, with a glass of icewater<br> clutched in her hand. "I can't stand it," she often wailed to Yuffie.

> "I feel like I'm going to melt!"<p>

"You do this every summer," Cloud told her.

"There was never any summer in Midgar," she defended herself. "And in

> Nibelheim it just meant it didn't snow, andâ€| ooohâ€| how can you two<br> stand it?"

Yuffie just snickered. "You should see Wutai. It's at least fifteen

> degrees higher than this in midsummerâ€|"<p>

Tifa just gave another groan and buried her head under a cushion.

"Too dry," Cloud said absently. "The flowers are wilting. Aeris > dislikes this weather." <p>

Both of the girls had grown to take no notice of Cloud's talking of

> women long dead as if they were still there. It was better not to ask. <p>

"Vincent hates it too," Yuffie piped up. "He can't wear his scarf."

Tifa took time out from getting up close and personal to the cushion to

> look up with mischievous eyes. "How <em>is<em> he?"

"He's okay." Yuffie had eventually coaxed Vincent out of the shell he'd

> retreated into after the dancing and the topic had been dropped; she<br> was still determined to make him go, though.

"Good, because he only really talks to youâ€|" A wink was directed to

> her, and another cushion was immediately thrown at Tifa's head.<p>

"And what's that supposed to mean, huh?"

"Nothing! Nothing!" Tifa protested laughingly, throwing the cushion to  
> a smirking Cloud. <p>

Above their amused voices came the deep-toned rap of the knocker on the  
> door.<p>

"I'll get it," Cloud said above the giggles and wandered over to the  
> main hall. Tifa and Yuffie pelted the cushion back and forth until they<br> heard a sweet, childish voice proclaim, "Hiya, Unkie Cloud!"

"Barret!" Tifa and Yuffie squealed as one and tripped over each other  
> trying to get to the door. Indeed, their large, darkskinned friend was<br> there, setting Marlene down as he and Cloud punched eachother's  
> shoulders in the primeval male greeting. Marlene jumped into Tifa's<br> arms with a happy cry and Barret turned to hug Tifa as gently as one  
> could with a gun-arm. "Heyas, Teef! Yer lookin' good, gir'."<p>

"So're you! Was the trip from Corel here okay?"

Barret nodded eagerly. "We gotta new train system goin', an' it runs  
> sweet, specially since everyon' needs so much coal nowâ€|" Barret looked<br> at the small figure squeezing it's way between Tifa and Cloud and  
> smirked. "An' who da hell's dis?"<p>

"It's Yuffie," Cloud proclaimed, the same smirk decorating his lips.

"Nuh-uh. Dat not Yuffie. Yuffie only dis big." Barret spread a hand.

> "An' anyway, Yuffie woul' be in my Materia pouch already, foo'."<p>

"Bar-ret!"

"Wait, dat's Yuff. Still got the same whine."

Yuffie jumped forward and playfully smacked his arm, albeit gently.

> "He-ey! Unfair!" <p>

The huge man grinned, then his face grew somber. "Heard 'bout yer papa,  
> Yuffie. I'm jes' sorry."<p>

The slight ninja froze slightly and then plastered a sickly, fake smile  
> to her lips. "Yeah, well. Anyway." She spun around hurriedly. "Tifa,<br> want me to start dinner or something?"



Tifa stopped playing the tickling game with Marlene and gave her easy  
> grin to Yuffie. "I already put a stew on. Maybe you could just set  
the<br> table, Yuff?"

She hurried off.

Barret stared after her sadly and shook his head. "Somefin' wrong  
wit'  
> dat girl, Teef."<p>

"Yeah, I know. She's been a perfect angel here, though. Apparently,  
> she's only her usual scampy self with Vincent." Tifa set Marlene  
down<br> and she scampered off to the living room, followed by 'Unkie  
Cloud'.

"Yeah, Vincent's here, innit he?" Barret smirked. "Sheee-it. Never  
> thought he'd git along wit' Yuffie."<p>

"Miracles do happen!" The dark-haired woman smiled wistfully to  
> herself.<p>

As they all laughed and conversed and regaled each other with funny  
> anecdotes over the as-always delicious stew Tifa had cooked up,  
there<br> came yet another knock at the door.

Yuffie shrugged and got up out of her chair. "My call," she  
> volunteered and padded over to the door.<p>

Opening it revealed a very uncomfortable-looking Vincent. "Good  
> evening, Yuffie," he murmured. <p>

A big grin split over her face. "Hi, Vinny! What's wrong?"

All conversation stopped at the dinner table in an effort to unsubtly  
> listen in. <p>

"Nothing's wrong." It was too balmy tonight for Vincent to be dressed  
> in anything but black slacks and a shirt, his raven-dark hair  
tied<br> back. Yuffie tried discreetly to smooth her hair down as she  
stared at  
> him. Dear Gods, he was handsome. Eventually her brain managed to  
tune<br> into what he was saying.

"â€| supposed to be a shower of them tonight, and I was wondering if  
you  
> wanted to see, as you were so upset the last time you missed  
themâ€|"<p>

"Shooting stars?" Yuffie enthused. "I'm there! Just let me get my  
> shoes, okay?" She sped up the stairs, practically tripping over  
her<br> feet in an effort to get there quickly enough.

A piercing wolf-whistle broke through Vincent's uncomfortable  
fidgeting

> at the door and he looked through at the dining table at three slyly<br> grinning faces. He coughed lightly and tried not to look flustered.

> "Welcome, Barret."<p>

"Hey, yerself," Barret boomed. "Now, we all 'spect Yuff to be back by

> eleven, kay? And no funny business!" The whole table broke out in<br> giggles.

"â€|." Vincent offered them the dirtiest look he could muster whilst

> still looking serene and went back to the door, where Yuffie was now<br> awaiting.

"Are you ready?" he asked softly.

"As I'll ever be!"

> \_\_\_\_\_<p>

Again, lying on the hard tiles of Vincent's roof.

Yuffie was hugging herself tightly, eyes wide. Vincent had been correct

> - there had been some meteroids shooting through the sky, looking like<br> diamonds falling down to earth. She'd confessed to feeling frightened

> when she first saw them, remembering Meteor; but Vincent had soothed<br> that there was very little chance that these could hurt anyone and she

> had been caught up in the sparkling, shooting beauty of them. So now<br> here they were, doing one of the most age-old things people can do.

"Vinnie, you see those stars over there?" A finger pointed up.

"Mmm-hmm? The ones to the left?"

"Yeah, that cluster of about five. If you squint really hard, it kind

> of looks likeâ€|" <p>

"Materia?"

"Vin-cent!"

"Very well. What does it look like?"

"It looks like a Shuriken," she said, voice very offended.

Vincent squinted slightly. "Actually, those are the Ayami."

"Ayami?" The name rung a bell. "I can't rememberâ€|"

"The Iris-sisters. There is a story about them that I recallâ€|"

Yuffie stretched out her full length on the warm tiles beneath her.

> "Tell me?"<p>

His voice was low, husky and clear in the starlight. "Many years ago,

> there was a beautiful girl who lived in poverty up on Da Chao, in  
a<br> tiny hut. She was an extremely rare beauty, so her father  
desperately

> tried to find a wealthy husband for her so that she would not live  
out<br> the cruel life that she found in that hutâ€|"

Yuffie closed her eyes and focused on Vincent's soft voice, re-living

> the tale. All of a sudden she was six again, soft dark hair  
being<br> brushed by her father, ignoring the pull when he brushed  
out the

> tangles and listening wide-eyed to the tale of the beautiful girl  
who<br> married the evil lord and fell in love with the handsome  
gardener.

"â€| and she threw herself off the mountain. But the gods felt such  
for

> her that they took her body and carried it up to the stars, where  
it<br> fell and became the flowers that she had so lovedâ€|" Vincent  
stopped

> abruptly and sat up when he heard the soft, choking sounds coming  
from<br> Yuffie's throat. "Yuffie! What is wrong?"

Yuffie buried her head in her hands and turned away from the dark-

> clothed man, her throat choked with sobs. "Godo used to tell me  
that<br> story," she eventually whimpered out. "When I was  
little."

Feeling a wave of sorrow, Vincent gently helped the crying ninja up

> with his good hand and stroked her back. She immediately fell  
forward<br> and buried her head in his chest, finally sobbing out the  
tears that

> she had been keeping back for so long.<p>

"Cry it out," he instructed.

"Gawd," she sobbed into his shirt. "I miss him so much, Vincent! It's

> like there's this big hole inside of me, and nothing ever fills it  
upâ€|" <p>

"Grief lasts forever." He used his claw to balance them, closing his

> own eyes as images freely danced along his eyelids. "But eventually  
you<br> feel it less, and lessâ€|"

Eventually her weeping slowed to merely sniffing and she looked at

> him, eyes red, but a spark of hope in them. "When? How do you  
handle<br> it? How did you handleâ€| Lucrecia?"

Surprisingly, there was no stiffening in his body when he heard his

> lost beloved's name, and he felt a small pang of guilt. "I went

looking  
for Lucrecia after  
after Meteor, Yuffie. And when I found her body  
> finally  
all I felt was relief that she was finally at peace."  
He  
didn't mention the feeling that he wanted immediately go to peace with  
> her, and the grief-stricken sobs that emanated from his throat  
-  
exactly like Yuffie's - when he found her frozen corpse, lying at the  
> bottom of the waterfall she had so loved. She'd killed herself.  
<p>

Yuffie huddled against him. "I'm so sorry"  
She coughed, draining the  
> last of the tears away.<p>

"Focus on your own grief, Yuffie. Just handle what you have."

She nodded and rubbed her eyes tiredly. "I better get home  
thanks for  
> the stars, Vincent. It was great." <p>

He stood and walked over to the grating they usually climbed to get  
> onto his roof. "Do you want me to walk you to your door?" <p>

"Why not?" Yuffie gave him a slight smile.

They walked back in silence.

When they reached Tifa's door Yuffie turned to Vincent and unexpectedly  
> gave him a tight hug around the waist, resting her cheek against his  
tear-dampened shirt. "Thanks."

Vincent disentangled himself from the smaller woman and opened the door  
> for her. "Get some rest, Yuffie. You'll feel better in the morning."<p>

She nodded and went in, closing the door behind her.

Vincent shuddered slightly and pinched his hand as he began the walk  
> back to his house, up the stairs. Yuffie was getting dangerous, worming  
her way into his heart like  
like Vincent didn't know. Nobody had  
> really done it before.<p>

Except she who was now dead.

The tall man leant against his door and for one brief moment, he wished  
> he could now cry like Yuffie had done in his arms.<br>

---

Yuffie only had a few days of peace before everyone started arriving

> for Solar. The whole town was bustling with people and had even been  
extended slightly with a makeshift marketplace. Yuffie would have gone

> there every day to check out all the wares - especially the Rare Materia<br> tent - but there was some far more exciting things going on at Tifa and  
> Cloud's house, which was getting quite crowded. <p>

"Wakey, waaaaaaaaaaaaakey!"

The dark-haired ninja woke up with a slight scream. This was just what

> she needed - some guy screaming like a megaphone in her ear every<br> morning! Then she turned and blinked, because it was a megaphone.

"Cait, if you don't get out of my room, I will throw something at you,

> so help me Gawd!" <p>

The cat smirked and hopped off his Mog, jumping into Yuffie's lap.

> "Tifa said to get you up for breakfast, though you're getting so fat I<br> doubt you need itâ€¦!"

"Do you want breakfast either? I can always shove my fist down your

> throat!" <p>

"Hah! Watch me tremble!"

"Reeve was sooo on drugs when he made you, cat."

"Same to your mamma!"

Yuffie and Cait Sith stared at each other for about ten seconds before

> bursting out laughing. Yuffie swung Cait onto her shoulder and bounced<br> out the room in her nightgown, followed by an equally bouncy Mog.

"Good morning, Yuffie, Cait." Nanaki came padding down the hallway, his

> flaming tail swirling shadows on the walls.<p>

"Mornin' Reddy. Giddeeyup, wench!" Cait tugged on Yuffie's hair.

"Don't pull so hard!" Yuffie grumbled but obediently trotted off down

> the stairs. <p>

"Cid, do you want some more tea?" Tifa's voice drifted up to the pair.

"@\$%^ yeah! You make good tea, kid. Almost as good as Shera's."

Yuffie giggled and bounced into the dining room. "How you convinced her

> to marry you, I have no idea, Cid!"<p>

"Cause of my manly charm!" The blonde pilot stubbed out his cigarette

> and took the steaming cup from Tifa's hands and breathed in the scent.<br> "\$#%@ yeah."

Tifa nodded at Yuffie and jerked her head to the table. "Your porridge  
> is going to go cold!"<p>

"It better be diet," Cait called up from Yuffie's head. "Yuff's getting  
> bulgy!"<p>

"I hate you, Cait," she said companionably and plonked herself down  
> next to Cid, shovelling porridge into her mouth as fast as she could.<p>

"What's your rush?" Tifa asked curiously.

"Gotta get to Vincent's. Festival tonight. Convince," she said between  
> gulps. <p>

Cait Sith jumped back down on his Mog and gave a piercing whistle,  
> waving his hand out at Yuffie flirtatiously. "That Vinny is such a  
a<br> hunk! I have to invite him to the prom!"

"He's all mine," Yuffie kidded, chasing a bit of porridge around with  
> her spoon. <p>

"Only if the 'fat, ugly' look comes in, sis-tah."

"Cait!" Tifa admonished.

"Don't worry, Tifa," the ninja grinned, picking her bowl up and washing  
> it off at the sink. "Cait's just jealous because I'm twice the man<br> he'll ever be."

"You two are &\$(#ing nuts," Cid said comfortably.

"Thanks for breakfast, Tiff. Is anyone using the bathroom?"

"I think Barret was giving Marlene a bath."

"I'll just get dressed, then. I'll be at Vincent's!" she called and  
> sped back upstairs.<p>

"Like you're ever anywhere else," Tifa murmured, grinning. Then she  
> raised her voice. "Be back by twelve! That's when the festival starts!"<p>

Yuffie was practically cartwheeling as she sped along to the weaponry,  
> bursting through the door and grinning to find quite a few customers<br> already there. He nodded briskly so she vaulted over

the countertop.

"Coming to Solar tonight," she said in between customers, putting some  
> gil in the till and handing back a few coins of change. "Make sure  
you<br> polish the blade of that thing," she called after a man.

"I don't knowâ€|"

"I know. All you have to do is say 'Yes'."

"But you have Cid, and Barret, and everyone," Vincent said lamely,  
> serving the last customer.<p>

"I don't want them," Yuffie said firmly. "I want you."

She swore she saw Vincent's cheeks going pinkish. "That is a great  
> compliment, Yuffie, butâ€|"<p>

"Buuuut?" she asked, resting one arm against the counter.

"Butâ€| butâ€|" Vincent looked at Yuffie's insistent dark eyes and  
sighed.  
> "I'm going, aren't I?" <br> \_\_\_\_\_

"Isn't this fun?" Yuffie shouted over the band set up in the middle  
of  
> Kalm, grinning at Vincent evilly. <p>

He mimicked plugging his hands in his ears. "Loud!"

"Wouldn't be fun if it wasn't loud!"

Cloud appeared out of the crowd and tugged on Yuffie's sleeve.  
> "Vincent, Yuff - we're just having a meeting quickly. Nothing's<br>  
happening now, anywayâ€|"

Yuffie nodded and grabbed for Vincent's hand, and they all threaded  
> their way out of the crowd and made their way into Tifa's house.  
<p>

Everyone was in Tifa's living room and she stood up as she saw them  
> approaching. She grinned at them warmly and passed them both  
glasses of<br> some sort of wine.

"Who's minding your bar, Tiff?" Yuffie asked curiously.

"Anton," she said dismissively, then sat down again, holding her  
glass  
> up for attention. Both Vincent, Cloud and Yuffie pulled up  
chairs<br> around the circle of friends and listened.

"We don't get together much," she started slowly. "Cloud, Vincent and  
I  
> are making our lives in Kalm. Barret's the mayor of Corel, Cid  
works on<br> his machines with Shera, Red's far away in the Cosmo

Canyon, and

> Yuffieâ€| " She nodded at the ninja - "Yuffie's working out the kinks of<br> her life."

"She's awfully kinky," Cait agreed from Red's side.

"And Reeve and Cait are rebuilding Shinra. So all we can do is have the

> odd call on the PHS." Tifa expelled a breath. "But this never means<br> that we don't care for eachother. I'd just like to say that I've never  
> felt closer to anyone after what we went through." <p>

"Hear, hear," Red murmured softly.

"All we have - if we're lucky - is this festival each year. So, to sum

> up this year, I'd like to make a few toastsâ€|"<p>

"With ayyyl-co-hol," Cait intoned deeply.

Yuffie giggled.

Tifa gave a playful glare Cait Sith's way and held up her glass. "I'd

> just like to toast Cloud, who is, as always, the best house-mate ever<br> and never fails to amuse meâ€|"

"She's just saying this because I do all the cleaning up," Cloud said

> in a stage-whisper. <p>

"â€|and will remain as always, my best friend. To Cloud!"

"To Cloud!" they all agreed and downed the drink if they had one.

The toasts of that day were the usual sort of thing you'd expect; Cid

> toasted the Highwind, to much booing and laughing, Shera toasted her<br> husband. Red toasted Tifa, Cait toasted himself. Marlene very solemnly

> toasted her papa and then gave herself a milk mustache. When it came to<br> Yuffie, for a few moments, she didn't know what to say. Then she

> cheerily lifted her glass.<p>

"To Vincent Valentine, who puts up with me and my whining."

"Yuffie," Vincent admonished gently. "You don't whine."

"Not anymore," Cid grumbled darkly.

Vincent gave Cid his patented Look and lifted his own glass to

> Yuffie's. "Then in turn, I toast you, forâ€|" His voice trailed off, and<br> he swallowed slightly. "For beingâ€| the best helper in the weaponry I  
> have ever had the pleasure of having." <p>



For a moment Yuffie couldn't speak; she just glowed. Her ears tuned out  
> all the murmurs of her friends and for a moment she was lost in those<br> crimson eyes. Her knees were suddenly weak and her mouth dry, and  
> suddenly euphoria coursed through her body like a drug. <p>

\_I'm in love with Vincent Valentine.\_

"â€| amazed she hasn't stolen anything," she heard Cloud ribbing her  
> gently, so she turned around, cheeks flushed. "Shhh, Cloud."  
<p>

He just laughed and then held his glass up, gaze turned high to the  
> heavens. "And here's to sweet Aeris, who's still watching me."  
He<br> tipped back his glass and immediately chugged everything that was in  
> it. <p>

Tifa took another sip for Aeris and then looked at Cloud gently.  
> "You're only supposed to take a small amount for toasting." <p>

He nodded guiltily and set his glass down, the room quiet, the strains  
> of music from outside filling the air. "But every time I think of her,<br> I get the urge to get drunk."

Outside the band stopped and people applauded. Silence pervaded the  
> room. <p>

"Anyway," Tifa said with false cheerfulness. "We can enjoy the festival  
> now! Big dance competition on tonight. Personally, I've been waiting<br> four years to win."

Barret laughed and put a hand on Tifa's shoulder. "Don' get yer hopes  
> up, girl. Spike's got two left feet."<p>

"Can't be as bad as me," Yuffie piped up.

"You're not bad, Yuffie," her blackclothed friend - love - friend -  
> defended. <p>

"Nah. I'm worse." She grinned at him, slightly goofily, and clapped.  
> "C'mon, people! Time to paaaar-tay!" <br>

---

Despite fears, the night started out one of the best of her life.

She gorged up on candy like a little kid, bounced up and down to the  
> lively music, and thought quite seriously about trying out getting<br> sloshed before she saw Vincent aiming his Look at her. So

she merely  
> took some punch and sighed at him. <p>

He was the best part. Yuffie clung to him like a burr throughout the

> day, the hours passing quickly - so quickly! - as they discussed  
the<br> merchandise, debated about candy and even joked. The sunset  
soon fell

> on Kalm and lanterns were turned on all over the town. This just  
gave<br> the atmosphere an even more electric charge, and adrenaline  
ran through

> Yuffie's veins like blood. The makeshift dancefloor was cleared  
out<br> even more for more space, and seats for judges were  
arranged.

"Vincent?"

"Mmm-hmm?" He looked up from his punch which he had been nervously  
>sipping. <p>

"I want to go change for tonight, okay? I won't be more than a couple  
>of minutes."<p>

"Do you want me to change too?" His look was doubtful.

She laughed and gave him an easy grin. "You look fine as you are.  
Just

> keep the ladies off you," she teased.<p>

Vincent had the grace to flush.

Yuffie hurried through the crowds again to Tifa's and smiled  
> indulgently at Red and Cait, who were both curled up on the  
couch.<br> There was no time to reflect, however - racing up to her  
room, she

> dumped her suitcase out onto the bed, hoping one of her most  
precious<br> possessions was still intactâ€|

It was. Yuffie Kisaragi was not a dress girl, but a kimono always had  
a

> different sort of style to it. And this wasn't the kind of  
traditional<br> thing you wore at home - this wasn't the kind of  
thing even Yuffie

> could manage to shock her elders with. This short, sleeveless style  
was<br> something she'd found in her mother's closet and fallen in  
love with.

> Satin and white, it only came down to mid-thigh and was  
embroidered<br> with silver threads. As an afterthought, she pulled  
the bandanna out of

> her hair. She hurriedly threw her blouse and shorts off and pulled  
it<br> on, fastening it all up at the front, and looked at her  
reflection in

> the mirror. <p>

\_Yeah, Yuff,\_ her brain said quietly. \_You're no Tifa Lockhart, and  
no

> Aeris Gainsborough, but you don't need to be. You're Yuffie  
Kisaragi,<br> and you're a woman now. \_

\_ Is that going to be enough to impressâ€| him?\_

Yuffie immediately dashed the adolescent thought out of her mind and

> pulled her hair back, managing to secure it into a bun. <p>

There. She was dressed to die. Her mind screamed at her that she'd

> gotten the wrong anecdote, but it seemed more fitting that way.  
<p>

\_All or nothing, all or nothing,\_ her brain kept on reciting, and with an

> easy grin plastered carefully on her face, Yuffie strutted back down to<br> the crowd - and Vincent.

> \_\_\_\_\_ <p>

Vincent Valentine almost choked on his punch when a ghost from his

> past, dressed all in white, floated through the crowd and smiled at<br> him. "Michiko!" he spluttered.

The vision then grinned, and he focused his eyes on her and felt

> utterly, utterly inane. "I'm.. sorry, Yuffie. You resemble your mother<br> so muchâ€|" \_But you have your father's pirate grin,\_ he thought to  
> himself. <p>

She laughed, and gently spun around in a circle. "You like?" Yuffie

> asked, almost shyly. <p>

Vincent had to swallow before he went on. Yuffie wasâ€| so classically

> beautiful, but so untraditionally playful and bright. Michiko had<br> bought that kimono for a reason, he remembered, and the reason had

> probably been Godo. As much as his mind screamed against him, his hands<br> wanted to trace the line of her waist to her bust, so as to tell

> whether the delicate line that her figure stated was really real. The<br> neckline was so docile, the collar curving high, and the shortness of

> it was so blatantly teasing in comparison. Vincent tore his eyes off<br> the slight ninja and noticed quite a number of other men not able to do

> the same.<p>

Yuffie was staring at him curiously. "Is there something wrong?"

"No! Nothing wrong," he said, a little too abruptly. "You lookâ€| most

> like Michiko. I still remember when she wore that dress." <p>

Her eyes gleamed, hungry for knowledge. "Do I look a lot like her?

I've

> seen pictures, butâ€|" <p>

"Michiko-chan wore her hair longer. Her face was also moreâ€| oval, you  
> have more of your grandmother's face." Vincent looked up, eyes far<br> away. "The images are hazy, but as I recall, your line of women has  
> always been beautiful..." <p>

"Clear the floor!" a voice suddenly boomed from the stage. Vincent

> recognized it as the mayor of Kalm. "It's time for the thing you've all<br> been waiting for - the Kalm Solar Festival dancing competition!"

Yuffie clapped and hooted, as did quite a lot of other people.

The floor was obediently cleared and the mayor grinned, sticking his

> hands in his belt. "First competition will be for the under-fifteens,<br> solo and pairs danceâ€|"

More cheering, and all the children of Kalm eventually sifted out onto

> the dance floor. Both Vincent and Yuffie spotted a very eager-looking<br> Marlene in the thick of it. This part of the competition was really

> just an amusing warm-up and a chance to get the children tired before<br> the real dancing began and the party lasted all night.

The music started up and Yuffie whistled piercingly. "Go, Marlene!" she

> shouted to the little girl, who was very seriously bouncing up and down<br> and turning spins.

The dark-haired ninja smiled warmly at her companion and tugged on his

> sleeve. "If we're not going to dance anyway, why don't we just watch<br> from your roof?"

Vincent nodded, looking slightly relieved. "It would be good to get out

> of this crowd."<p>

It was easy to glide through the crowd and skirt up the stairs to  
> Vincent's weaponry. From up on the roof, the crowd below looked like<br> one big glittering decoration.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

The music came to a close. Marlene didn't win first prize, but everyone

> was graced with some candy and she got the loudest cheers of all from<br> her adoring papa.

Vincent watched the girl beside him as she yelled and cheered for Tifa

> and Cloud as they left to go on the dance floor.<p>

Yuffie sat down and grinned at the scene, relaxing and stretching back.

> Vincent did the same, slightly awkwardly, but the girl merely tugged<br> him closer and gently took his left claw between her hands.

"Yuffie!" he protested.

Her fingers traced the metal joints of it and soothingly ran along his

> claws. "Does this hurt?"<p>

"N-no," he managed. "Butâ€| it's very sensitive, Yuffie."

She nodded and carefully placed it back in his lap, slyly taking his

> other hand instead. Vincent had to swallow hard, getting exceedingly<br> uncomfortable. Whyâ€| was she touching him so much? Nobody had touched

> him willingly forâ€| for years. Vincent didn't know whether to shake her<br> off or squeeze her hand.

Yuffie smiled at him beatifically and turned on the full force of her

> smile, complete with the dimple Vincent was so used to by now.

"Thanks,<br> Vin. For helping me all this time. Gawdâ€| I was such a mess when I got

> here."<p>

"You were mourning," Vincent responded. "It was natural."

"You helped me get back to normal, though." Yuffie's heart was turning

> flip-flops inside her. <em>He hadn't let go of her hand.<em>

"Andâ€| we're close,

> right?" she asked, somewhat pathetically. <p>

Vincent's pale face looked thoughtful for a moment, then he nodded.

"As

> close as anyone can be to me, I suppose." <p>

Yuffie's heart went into meltdown in her chest. Right now, all she

> wanted to do was jump into his arms and cling to him, whispering that<br> he wouldn't be lonely ever again. \_Lovesick,\_ she teased herself.

She grinned at him shyly as a balmy breeze ruffled her hair. "I'm  
> glad."<p>

Yuffie stretched out, lying on her back, and it took a few moments for

> Vincent to join her. So close! She could hear every breath that he<br> took, and every slightest shift of his bodyâ€|. She kidded herself that

> she was in heaven. Turning her head, her nose was almost touching his<br> earâ€| so closeâ€| so dangerously close.

Eventually he did the same thing, looking at her, an almost curious

> gleam to his crimson eyes. "Yuffie?" he asked. <p>

Yuffie Kisaragi had been trained to act on instinct, and right now,

> every cell in her body was screaming to do the same thing, so she<br> pushed her head forward the little way it took to kiss him.

There are

> some moments that live in your head forever; and the brush of her lips<br> against his was one that did for Yuffie. The moment held her in stasis

> as she too eagerly poured her soul out in her kiss, her touch somehow<br> longing, her hand unconsciously squeezing his harder.

It lasted possibly less than a second.

Vincent pushed her away and jumped up so fast that he was almost a

> blur. And all she could do was giggle at his reaction and look up and<br> grin, idiotically.

Too late she realized that his reaction was not one borne of mere

> surprise; his eyes were wide with horror and he was shaking.

"Yuffie!"<br> he began, voice strangled.

The flipflopping of her heart soon turned to the flipflopping of her

> stomach as she saw the almostâ€¦ repulsed look in his eyes.

"Vincent?"<br> She jumped up and tugged on his sleeve, still not fully understanding.

> Time to pull out her last trump card to change his mind. "I love you,<br> Vincent!" she trailed off.

"I think I should leave." He was backing away from her. Like she was a

> monster. <p>

"Vincent, I -"

"â€¦ I think you got the wrong impression, Yuffie. I could neverâ€¦"

Yuffie tonelessly finished the sentence for him, heart hardening up

> like drying clay. "â€¦ love someone like me?"<p>

All he did was give her another look and somersault off the roof, into

> the night. <p>

The ninja quietly brought one hand up to her chest and looked after him

> as music continued on at the unknowing, happy revellers.

Strangely<br> enough, her eyes were dry as she contemplated her situation. Her mouth

> was working overtime to suck air into her lungs; Yuffie felt as if she<br> was drowning.

This was no time for tears.

It had been a mistake to come to Kalm. If she was going to screw up her

> life, she might as well do it where she was at home.<p>

And where she could screw up because of herself, and not because of men  
> who she fooled herself into thinking had hearts.<br>

---

Tifa giggled at Cloud and whapped him away playfully as they both tried  
> to crash through the door at once. "Lemme through, you big lug!"<p>

"Yes, milady!" Cloud said with a mock-bow. "Should I lick the floor  
> clean before you enter your palace?" <p>

Her response was a light punch to his arm before yawning and walking  
> into her living room. "What time is it?"<p>

"Two in the morning?"

"Hmph. We came back early. Yuffie must be asleep already." Tifa plomped  
> herself down in an armchair. <p>

"Want something to drink?" Cloud took off his jacket and ambled into  
> the kitchen. <p>

"Water."

He came back with two glasses of water and an envelope in his hand.

> "Looks like you have mail," he commented, handing her the plain white<br> envelope with "Tifa" written on it.

"Weird." Tifa accepted her water and set it down as she got busy  
> slitting open the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper, the  
<br> handwriting small and delicate. Tifa began to read, her hazel eyes  
> slowly getting bigger and bigger.<p>

\_ Dear Tifa, \_

\_ I'm leaving Kalm. \_

\_ It's time for me to live up to my responsibilities and go back home.

> Please give everyone my love, and I thank you and Cloud deeply for<br> letting me stay here. I've cleaned out my room.\_

\_ Love, Yuffie.

> <em> \_\_\_\_\_

Dressed in her now comfortably-familiar green shirt and khaki shorts,

> Conformer gripped in her hand, Yuffie surveyed the town that had been<br> her home for the past month. "Thank you," she whispered to it.

Then she set off to Junon, to catch a ship for Wutai, and home.  
And Yuffie Kisaragi didn't cry.  
No point any more.

### 3. Part Three

\_For Yuffie Valentine, for without whose input and gentle\_  
> <em>nudging along I would never have continued; for all those<em>

> <em>purty reviewer-type people who give me nothing but  
confidence;<em>  
> <em>and for everyone who said, "Guardian, you lazy bugger,<em>  
> <em>hurry this damn story up."<em>

\* \* \*

> <p><strong>Much Ado About Yuffie<strong>

\* \* \*

> "VINCENT!"<p><p>

Even if he had been asleep, the pounding on the door combined  
> with the unholy screech would have woken both him and all the  
ghosts<br> that remained in his tiny house.

"Vincent Valentine, you open this door right now, or you won't HAVE a  
> door to open!"<p>

Running a hand through his hair and pulling it up in a ponytail  
hurriedly,  
> he made his way over to the door, trying to recall when he'd last  
heard<br> Tifa so angry. He unlocked his door and raised an eyebrow  
at her.  
> "Ms. Lockheart?"<p>

She was still in her festival dress, but her makeup was smeared and  
her hair  
> was falling loose from it's bun. Her hazel eyes were like laser  
beams and<br> her hands were clenched in fists, with one very  
pathetic-looking crumpled  
> piece of paper clutched in her left.<p>

Her voice was an amazing weapon, rising and falling in a low-pitched

> crescendo. "Vincent, don't you <em>dare<em> try to tell me you  
didn't have a  
> hand in this because I can bet <em>every<em> gil I own that you  
were the one  
> responsible and if you don't tell me what the <em>hell<em> happened  
last night  
> I'm going to take a <em>very<em> blunt knife and hack away at your  
ba - "

"Tifa, what happened?"



"YOU happened!" she shouted, and waved the paper at him like it  
> was a gun. Vincent deftly snatched it and unfolded it, his eyes<br>scanning over the lines.

A freezing hand gently folded around his heart, which was slowly  
> sinking like a ship in an ice-cold sea, and he began a full-body  
tremble.<p>

("\_... I could **\*\*never\*\***â€|\_")

\_I never meant that why did you not understand I thought you  
understood\_  
> <em>because it's not you incapable it's me and I... I...  
Yuffie!<em>

("\_â€| love someone like me?"\_)

It was something more than mere will that made his voice steady.  
> "I see."<p>

"You see? You SEE?" Tifa's voice rose to a shriek. "WHAT THE HELL  
> HAPPENED?"<p>

"Yuffie made... a mistake. Through this mistake, she has obviously  
> decided there is nothing left for her in Kalm." <em>May the Gods  
strike<em>  
> <em>you down dead, Vincent Valentine.<em>

Hands with the power to crush bones lifted him up by his shirt collar  
> and he found himself thrown back onto the hard wooden floor.<br>  
Momentarily winded, he gasped, and looked up at 5'5" of very  
> angry Tifa Lockheart.<p>

"I don't like using violence on my friends, Vincent," she said  
silently.  
> "But Yuffie is very dear to me, and if you do not start  
talking..."<br> She punched one hand into the other.

For a moment, Vincent pitied Cloud deeply.

He took a breath and looked her level in the eye. "Yuffie admitted  
to...  
> having a crush of sorts on me. I rejected this."<p>

She sucked in a breath of her own. "Crush?"

For some reason, he could now not meet her in the eye. "She called it  
love."

Tifa's hands clenched again and she gritted her teeth. "Why, Vincent?  
> Why?"<p>

"I am incapable of loving someone as she would need," he answered  
> in monotone. "I have my own reasons."<p>

"Or maybe you're just \_too damn cowardly\_ to try to love someone,"  
Tifa

> hissed.<p>

Vincent sat up and looked at her, crimson eyes calculating. "Why are

> you doing this, Tifa?"<p>

She ignored him and pinched the bridge at the top of her nose before

> nodding. "Yes, that's it... you've got to go to Wutai. To patch things up."<p>

"What?"

"Do you ever want to see her again?"

\_To hear her laugh and say my name? To see that cheerful sparkle\_  
> <em>in her eye? Flying like a cannonball around me, making me smile?<em>

\_I care for her. But... not like that...\_

\_But...\_

\_I... this is all my fault. Another price I must pay.\_

"You would not comprehend - " he heard himself begin to say.

"I\_ comprehend\_ all too well," Tifa snapped back. "And you'd better

> <em>comprehend<em> that you're taking the next ship to Wutai. Cloud can

> run your shop, he's more than able to. And don't you dare come<br>back until everything's sorted out."

"What do you want from me?" he eventually asked, bemused.

The look in her eyes softened. "For Yuffie not to spend nights  
> wondering. For you not to spend nights wondering. For both of<br>you unable to look each other properly in the eye in the twenty  
> years later that you might meet, to not go through life<br>with just a ruined friendship..."

"For you not to take the same road I took."

\* \* \*

>Shipped in with the storage on a miserable little ship bound for Wutai,<br>Yuffie made her escape.

They'd protested they hadn't had any room. But Yuffie had persisted,

> over and over again, cajoling, pleading, begging, demanding, until finally<br>they packed her in with the storage.

It had been a long walk to Junon and she was tired; too tired to take

> no for an answer, or give a flying damn where they put her. So she<br>cuddled herself next to a big carton and fell asleep, dusty, dirty,

> unhappy and tear-stained.<p>

"Miss? Miss, wake up, miss."

The voice seemed to be coming from far away. Yuffie couldn't  
> concentrate.<p>

"We're in Wutai, miss." The sailor stared down at her, not  
unkindly.

"Oh... thakgoo," she said groggily and stood up.

Bright light. Yuffie wandered down the unloading plank, depressed  
> enough to vomit, to stare at the white-and-gable walls of  
Wutai.<p>

And it was worse than if Godo himself had risen out the ground.

"Oh, Gods - " Yuffie fell to the earth, shuddering, her voice sobbing  
> now in almost incoherent Wutaian. "I won't ever leave you again!  
Dear soil!<br> My soil!"

She rolled onto her back and wept as a late-flowering cherrytree wept  
> in turn with her, a few stray petals floating out towards her face.  
She<br> caught one in her hand and breathed in the faint scent deeply  
before  
> crushing it within her palms. Inside her nose was the smell of dust  
on<br> Da Chao, and the sharp tingling smell of the cherry petals was  
inside  
> her nose, smelling slightly like Vincent -<p>

\_ - Dust and welding, ylang-ylang and the sap of dandelions - \_

\_ - and \*\*he'd\*\* smelt like woodchips, like insense and the sap of  
dandelions - \_

Godo...

Vincent...

"Yuffie!"

Yuffie slowly shuddered out of her tears and blearily looked up into  
> Gorkii's worried, plump face.<p>

He fell to his knees beside her and smoothed the hair from her face

> gently, eyes so familiar and kind. "We've been so worried, little  
one,<br> and we could not search for you because we know your skills  
- and  
> then, the Gods lead me to the outwall to get my letters from the  
ship,<br> and there is Yuffie-san, crying as if her heart was  
breaking - "

She raised a hand to stop him speaking. "I'm fine, Gorkii. There's no  
> need to fuss anymore." Yuffie rose slowly and looked at the  
walls<br> of Wutai. "How's it been without me?"

"Wutai, Yuffie?" A moment of indecision passed over his face,  
> then he stood and gently took her arm. "Let us sit down and  
drink<br> tea over this matter."

Looking at him in slight confusion, she shrugged. "Sure. Gawd, it's  
> been a long time since I drunk your tea."<p>

"Five sugars?"

She shook her head, a smile etched on her face. "No sugar, this time.  
> I don't need it any more."<p>

And she laughed, and the echo of laughing before with a man wearing  
> black laughed back at her, and the hurt in her ached worse.<p>

\* \* \*

>"I need to go to Wutai."<p><p>

Cid Highwind looked at the man in front of him and took a deep sip of  
his tea.  
> "\$#. Why the hell d'ya wanna go to Wutai? Little shithole of a  
place.<br> Their tea &(#ing sucks."

Vincent merely stared at him.

"And you bloody &#ing walked over here. I always knew you  
> were out of your \$&#!ing mind." Cid finished his tea with a long  
swig.<br> "But my baby needs to get out a bit. Jus' to make sure she  
gets a bit  
> of damn exercise." Maternal pride shone in his eyes. "And maybe  
that<br> stupid &# at helm will fly 'er right. When d'ya need to  
go?"

"...As soon as possible."

"Great. Jus' give me ten minutes." Cid stuck his head out the  
> window. "#\$! Harry! Get your ass over here!"<p>

Vincent took a deep sigh. It would be a long, long trip, no matter  
> how fast the Highwind was.<p>

\* \* \*

>"You want me to <em>what<em>?" Yuffie paused in bringing the cup of  
tea in  
> her hand to her lips, staring in fascinated horror.<p><p>

"Yuffie Kisaragi, you are the daughter of Godo. He trained you, and  
> we trained you, in <em>all <em>things - including the nuances of  
rule." Gorkii  
> looked at her sternly. "Yuffie, it is your <em>duty<em>."

"Gawd, if I knew about this, I would have run away sooner!" Yuffie

> banged her teacup down. "I'm no damn leader, Gorkii - I can barely<br> run my own life, let alone the lives of the Wutaians!"

"It gets easier with time," Gorkii tried to soothe. "You will soon get  
> used to it, slip into the role, and become a great leader -"  
<p>

"Like Godo?" Yuffie asked coldly.

There was a pause.

"Yuffie," Gorkii began slowly, "There is\_ nobody we can turn to\_.  
> The people know you, they'd follow you, you are a Kisaragi -<br> do you really want to see Wutai turn into an even worse parody  
> of how we were before?"<p>

Yuffie pushed back her chair and stood up, hands trembling as  
> she clenched them into fists. "There are plenty of others they<br> can turn to!" she shouted. "Gawd, there's \_you\_, there's Chekov,  
> there's - there's - "<p>

"And all of us old men, Yuffie," the plump man said gently.  
> "You are young and strong. An old, infirm man will reign for maybe<br> a few years, and then again, Wutai will have no leader."

"I can't do it." Her voice trembled. "I won't do it."

"Then we are lost."

Yuffie took in deep, gasping breaths, trying to remember how to  
> breathe, trying to remember -<p>

Gorkii walked around the table and straightened her up, staring into her  
> big dark eyes. "Your father would have wanted you to do it."<p>

She stared at him wildly, then broke into sobs and sank to the floor.

"There, there." Gorkii stroked her hair. "Welcome home, Lady Kisaragi."

\* \* \*

>Yuffie lay in her bed, half-dozing, half alert -<p><p>

\_"Yuffie, can you pass me the lead shavings?"\_

\_"Why do you want me to?"\_

\_Phantom dancers alone in a small room with a wooden floor.\_

\_"Cry it out."\_

\_The touch of your shadow, the whisper of your name -\_

\_ "I love you, Yuffie." \_

\_ And the brush of his lips, but without his recoil, everything\_> <em>she'd ever wanted...<em>

\_ "I could never - " \_

She shivered herself to sleep.

\* \* \*

> Vincent slept infrequently. <p><p>

\_ A tall woman with eyes like jade and hair like sun on the cedars. \_

> <em>And a short girl-woman with eyes that sparkled brown and a look<em>

> <em>so delicate that you felt you had to crush her between your hands -<em>

\_ Why were they melding into one big aching wound? \_

\_ "Vincent - Hojo and I - we - we felt it best - " \_

\_ "Thanks for the stars, Vincent. It was great." \_

\_ "Can't you see how important this is to me?" \_

\_ A ring falling into the dust, and the vision of a white laboratory coat \_

> <em>turning into white silk before he dropped into darkness.<em>

\_ Why did he hurt every person he cared about? The demons inside him \_

> <em>prowled; did they come out in his personality?<em>

\_ "... love someone like me?" \_

For the first time in many a week, Vincent dropped into an

> almost coma-like sleep. <p>

\* \* \*

> "... and trade relations with Junon will have to be discussed, as<br>imports and exports lie directly on - "

Yuffie pinched her eyelid so that it stopped drooping.

" - and the imports lie towards - "

Her head drooped onto her hand.

" - perhaps we'll need a submarine port built when we - "

> Chekov looked at Yuffie. " - get an army made of huge pink<br>elephants."

"Will do," she muttered.

"We'll need a fleet of wooden chocobos, too."

"Mmm-hmm."

Chekov rolled his eyes and stood up. "Yuffie, go out and get  
> some air. I suppose I'm being unfair; you haven't even been  
given<br> leadership yet."

She blinked and shook her head tiredly. "I've been back a week.  
> I can take it. C'mon; what's that about sheep?"<p>

He chuckled and shut his book. "Just go relax, Yuffie-san.  
> Gods know you need it. This is going to be a long, hard  
process,<br> and you're not going to be able to rest for a  
while."

"Why, thank you sooo much for your positive outlook!"

Chekov stood and ruffled Yuffie's hair. "We're all behind you,  
Yuffie.  
> You'll be good for Wutai."<p>

"Let's hope." Yuffie stood and pinched her nose. "Gawd, I feel  
> like I've aged thirty years..."<p>

She stretched and muzzily strode out the house, imagining with  
> longing her nice soft futon and how amazingly wonderful it  
would<br> feel to collapse on it. All her stuffed animals were now  
hidden under  
> her bed, but they could be quickly called to have a convention  
and<br> a tea-party if she felt in the mood. After all, Kazuno the  
one-eyed  
> teddybear did not talk about taxation, Hotaru the other  
teddybear<br> did not care about relocation, and stuffed chocobo Boco  
did not  
> give a damn about Junon diplomacy matters. For this she  
worshipped<br> them.

And then the sky darkened overhead.

She had been far too close to the Highwind's engine not to recognize  
> the purr of it now; her heart split in two, one side leaping to her  
throat<br> as the other sank into her stomach. Why was Cid here? Were  
Tifa and  
> Cloud with him? Breaking into a run, she passed the puzzled  
villagers<br> and sprinted to the gate.

The day was hot, and as the Highwind landed a safe distance from the  
> walls it churned up dust. Yuffie cupped her hands over her eyes to  
prevent<br> them from being choked up with it, trotting towards the  
airship slowly.

No sooner than it had landed than it rose up again; Yuffie shielded  
> herself from the winds it conjured, but still had a fit of choking  
as the<br> dust went in her nose and mouth. Squeezing her eyes shut  
tightly, she  
> flailed around blindly in the cloud, only to lose her balance and

topple forward -<p>

A hand and something metal caught her under her arms and pulled her  
> upright. Her hands grabbed at a shirt and when she dared open her  
eyes<br> again it was black, the colour of the way she was feeling,  
and dear Gods -

She broke away almost madly to try and run away, not to get away from  
him,  
> but merely to stop the urge to fling herself into his arms and weep  
like a baby.<p>

But his hand must have extended, because it caught her as she began  
to  
> break away and pulled her back. The dust began to settle and she  
stared,<br> eyes large, trembling. The look in her brown eyes was  
that of a gazelle  
> wanting to take flight; her entire body was trembling.<p>

"Yuffie - "

"Get away from me." At least, she meant to say that, but it was lost  
> somewhere on it's way to her lips.<p>

Vincent let her go and she looked up at him fearfully; he was in his  
> normal shirt and pants, gunbelt secure, hair pulled away from his  
face,<br> crimson eyes... burning through her soul like always.  
> Shit. Why did she have to love him so much?<p>

"Yuffie," he started again.

This time her voice found itself. "Get away from me. Don't...  
> don't talk to me. Don't touch me." It broke mid-way.<p>

His brow furrowed and he looked pained. "Yuffie, I - "

"You didn't want to talk to me before, why talk now?" she rambled.  
"Why  
> did you come here? Gawd, wanted to see how I was getting  
on?"<p>

"Yes," he broke in. "... I wanted to know if you were well."

"Well, I'm fucking \_peachy\_!" she shrieked. "There, your guilt's  
satisfied,  
> now you can go and leave me the hell alone!" She turned on her  
heel<br> and began to stomp off. Wearily, he doggedly began to  
follow.

In a fit of rage, she managed to get halfway to her house, Vincent  
> following hopelessly behind, before she turned around again.<br>  
"Just \_go\_," she snarled.

He sighed. "If our friendship means something to you, please  
listen."



"It means nothing! Nothing!" she spat. "Gawd, if I'd known what would have  
> happened, I'd have not gone <em>near<em> you - " Lie. " - I'd have never \_looked\_ at you - "  
> Lie number two. " - and I wouldn't have even <em>liked<em> you, let alone..."  
> It trailed off.<p>

His brain had been shut off. Why couldn't he say anything to her?  
> Pretty little speeches had been conducted in his head all the way<br> from Rocket Town to Wutai, and none of them were coming to the  
> fore; all he could do was stand and stare at the little spark of fire<br> she was like a mute.

"Is this guy bothering you, Lady Kisaragi?"

"We can escort him out, if you want."

Oh, shit. This was not the sort of conversation to be held on a  
> public street, where everyone in Wutai wanted to know every<br> inch of the soon-to-be-official Lady Kisaragi's life.

"\_Lady\_ Kisaragi?" Vincent asked, eyebrow raised.

She waved off Yuusei and Kyuu. "I'll be fine. \_Arigato,\_" she said

> hurriedly and turned to Vincent. "This conversation can be conducted<br> somewhere else. Come on." She stomped off.

Vincent sighed and followed her unhappily.

Once he was through the door of her tiny house, she shut the door  
> with an angry bang and turned to him. "Whatever you want to say,<br> say it now."

"I'm sorry," he offered.

She looked at him, unconvinced.

"I... I never wanted... "

"Me to get the wrong idea," she finished coldly.

"To hurt you."

"Look, I've learnt my lesson. Don't blame yourself," she snapped,  
> eyes flaming. "I shoulda known better than to think you gave a damn."<p>

"I can't love anyone, Yuffie." It was\_ his \_turn to get the edge to his voice.  
> "I don't get close to anyone."<p>

"Don't give me that crap, Vincent. Everyone can love."

"I don't," he insisted coldly. "Nobody. I should not have let you close to me;  
> it was idiotic, thinking anyone would understand after her - "<p>

"She's \_dead!\_ She's \_dead!\_ If there's anyone who's dead, it's definitely  
> Lucrecia!" Yuffie had gotten extremely pink in the face now.  
"Are<br> you gonna go the same way Cloud did, huh? Talkin' to girls you can't see?  
> Calling her name out in your sleep? Gawd, Vincent what kind of life<br> is that? \_What kind of life is that!\_ Are you gonna pretend she's tangible?"

He was shaking himself, the demons within his soul baying for blood  
> as anger slowly rose. "You never understood - "<p>

"I understood plenty! You have to be strong for Lucrecia; admit  
> she's <em>dead<em>! If she really loved you, she'd want you to go on! I loved...  
> I loved Godo." Her voice cracked. "And I admitted he was dead.<br> He's not going to come back. But I'm going to live."

He said nothing, could not say nothing.

"You're trying to die while you're still living," Yuffie continued to rage.  
> "And it's not worth it! Don't be her, Vincent. If she'd loved you enough,<br> she wouldn't have taken her own li - "

With a snarling scream, Chaos wings broke out his back, his face  
> contorting in pain as the changes went through his body. The<br> Chaos demon was too impatient to wait; he grabbed Yuffie, ready to  
> squeeze her little body's bones to dust, ready to spill her blood  
-<p>

And she screamed, and that broke him away; falling to the floor, he  
> shuddered and writhed for control as the wings slowly receded.  
As<br> Vincent finally won the battle, all he did was lie on the floor, motionless.  
> He'd almost killed her. The hot blood running down his back from<br> where the wings tore at his too-delicate skin reminded him of what a  
> freak, a murderer, a torturous demon he really was.<p>

And then her little hands pulled him over, hauling and tugging,  
> to her bed, facedown so that the tears in his back were exposed<br> to her. So quietly, she brought a bowl of water over and began to  
> wash the blood away.<p>

"I... could have killed you."

"Just shut up." Her voice wasn't angry any more; merely tired and oddly  
> soothing. "Silly jerk."<p>

Her touch was light on his cuts. "But I'm... evil," he practically confessed,  
> closing his eyes. "I should die."<p>

"Nobody's going to be doing any dying," she said tartly. Yuffie got

up

> and began to rummage around in a drawer.<p>

"Why do you forgive me so easily about some things and not about others?"

> he asked, craning his head to the side.<p>

Her voice was as unsteady as his as she came down beside him again.

> "I never forgave you. I couldn't blame you in the first place." He could<br> hear that she was trying to smile, but it was coming out all wrong.

> "Love makes you unable to think straight."<p>

"Yuffie..."

"And it also makes you bandage up stupid men who should know  
> better than to come and argue with you." Her hands wrapped the<br> bandages she'd found around his chest and over his back, and they  
> were blissfully tight and cool against his bleeding cuts.<p>

He twisted his head around to look her in the eye, and suddenly he

> remembered the first and only time he'd loved, the fullness and depth<br> that overcame you and threatened to swallow you whole in it's suffering.

> The lopsided smile decorating her lips made him feel like he was able to<br> burst out crying; it was the face of someone trying to let go.

Letting go.

She noticed his face and drew her brows together quizzically. "It hurts?"

"Not anymore," he whispered.

Yuffie must have read something in his face because her scowl returned

> and she stood up. "I'll be in Godo's house," she instructed. "You can stay here,<br> if you want. My introduction to leadership ceremony's in a couple of days."

"So you really are going to be Lady Kisaragi." He closed his eyes.

> "Leadership of anything is a hard, unrewarding job, Yuffie."<p>

"Yeah, well, I'm used to not being rewarded." Her voice was light.

> "I'll come back later, Vincent."<p>

She fled out the door.

Vincent sighed and slumped his head forward.

\* \* \*

>She <em>did</em> come back, complete with a hastily-cooked meal, of which

> was not the highest quality of cooking - however, it was hot  
and<br> Vincent could identify most of it, so they sat opposite  
eachother,  
> eating in silence. She did the same for that night, and the next  
-<br> and barely acknowledged his presence otherwise.

Vincent ate delicately as Yuffie chomped like it was going out of  
style;  
> they studiously avoided looking at one another, and the only sound  
in<br> the room was the occasional clack of Vincent's arm as it hit  
the  
> table and the loud gnawing of Yuffie on her rice.<p>

After a little while, Yuffie couldn't stand it anymore and set down  
> her bowl. "Why?" she demanded.<p>

Vincent swallowed his mouthful. "Why what?"

"Why did you come back here? What did you want me to do?"

He looked at her sorrowfully, sitting up straight and unconsciously

> rubbing the place on his left arm where his metal claw joined into  
flesh.<br> "I wanted... to make things up to you. I know you left in  
anger..."

Yuffie stood up roughly from the table and turned her back on him.

> "Yeah, well, this hasn't made me feel any better," she said  
abruptly.<br> "I thought we had it sussed. You don't give a rat's ass  
for me, and  
> I pretend that - "<p>

"Yuffie, you know I care about you."

She whirled around, her face crimson. "Obviously not enough to  
> know that I wanna be left alone right now! Gawd, Vincent! Can't<br>  
you see? I can't HANDLE that you just care about me, I can't HANDLE

> that I'm suddenly going to be leader of Wutai, and I definitely  
can't<br> handle both of them being spread in my face at once! I  
can't bear  
> even looking you in the eye!"<p>

\_"Vincent, it's barely all I can do to look in your eyes right now. I  
can't\_  
> <em>handle so many things at once, and although I care for you  
deeply,<em>  
> <em>Vincent, you're not helping - "<em>

\_"But, Lucrecia - "\_

"And one thing I know - you never would've come after me without  
> prodding, Vincent. Was it Tifa or Cloud?"<p>

It was Vincent's own turn to rise from his seat. "You should know  
> by now that nobody can order me to do anything that I would not<br>  
want to do," he said shortly.

"Why did you \_want\_ to come here, then?"

"Because I miss you," he heard himself saying, almost faintly.  
> "I... I - Yuffie - "<p>

He looked at her face, an abnormal scowl pulled across it,  
> trying not to cry. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears,<br> and her hair was messy across her forehead. And she was so  
> beautiful right then, that he felt like he was still only a young thing like her,<br> full of hope and youth and promises and with so much love to give freely -  
> the same as he was, faced with Lucrecia, and the same as now she was,<br> faced with him -

Vincent didn't know how or why his good hand got to her cheek to cup it,  
> or why he raised her jaw to look at him; all he knew was that Yuffie<br> looked at him with wild eyes, then broke free from his grasp to sprint  
> blindly out the door.<p>

And where before he might have stayed, he'd learnt his lesson now;

> Vincent Valentine ran after her into the night.<p>

\* \* \*

>Panting and sweating, Yuffie finally collapsed on a little stone ledge on Da Chao.<br> She practically retched from exertion without warming up; the ascent to  
> the top of the mountain was not easy at the speed she desired.<p><p>

And even then she heard his footsteps behind her and she slumped to

> the ground. Damn Vincent. Damn Wutai. Hell, damn everybody and<br> everything, including her!

Vincent collapsed beside her and she heard his gentle breathing  
> compared to her own ragged gasps. It had not been a quick journey -<br> the sky was turning pink for the morning.

After a while, she looked at him, pink-faced from exertion. "You  
> got here awful quick," she murmured.<p>

"I cheated," he murmured back. "Death Gigas."

"You hate turning into the demons."

"I didn't want you to be up here alone."

"Damnit, Vincent," she growled, feeling frustrated. "I feel like  
> I have you figured out, and then you have to throw me off...<br> one minute you hate me, then you look like you might feel for me,  
> then you hate me again, and - "<p>

He placed a finger to her lips and pushed her bangs out her eyes.  
> "You should not get stressed so, Yuffie. Today is your leadership ceremony."<p>

"Leadership ceremony can go to hell," she muttered, but she relaxed slightly.  
> She fell to the ground again, rolling so her head was on his thigh. Vincent<br> flinched, but quickly curbed his instincts and let her rest.

She looked up at him, her bird-dark eyes more tired than anything else.  
> Vincent stared back, trying not to lose himself in her gaze.<p>

The noise of birdsong soon pulled Vincent from the darkness of her eyes  
> and he murmured to her, suddenly realising something.<br> "Does your Quadra materia go into Conformer?"

Yuffie blinked bemusedly. "I have Quadra? Gawd, don't I wish. Like  
> Cloud would give THAT up."<p>

An actual smile cracked onto his face. Caught. "So you came of  
> your own accord, Yuffie, all those years ago..."<p>

"A girl ain't made of stone, Vincent," she said flippantly.

He sighed. "You're irrepressible."

"You forgot, 'And wonderful, cute, and lovable.'"

"Certainly the last part," he whispered.

She sat up, trembling a little. "Don't... don't hurt me again, Vincent,  
> give me hope, gawd, I don't think I could bear it - "<p>

Vincent kneeled up and slowly, carefully put his arms around Yuffie.

> She gave a shudder and buried her head in his shoulder, whimpering.<p>

"I love you," he tried out, whispering in her ear, a shock of warmth

> going down his spine when he realised how purely true it was.<p>

And Yuffie, who had waited months on end wishing he could say that and  
> orchestrating responses in return, could only cry into his neck.<p>

The sun rose over them.

\* \* \*

>"So, to celebrate another wonderful year, I'd like us to have<br> a few toasts..." Tifa smiled smugly at Cloud. "Mine has to go  
> to Cloud. I hope you're enjoying all those dishes you've been<br> doing."

He groaned and raised his own glass to a snickering Yuffie.

> "I hope you realise this is all your fault!"<p>

She took a long swig from her own glass. "You shouldn't bet on  
> destiny, Cloud dear."<p>

Cait Sith jumped up eagerly onto her head, balancing himself.

> "So, has Vinny knocked you up yet?"<p>

"No," Yuffie said, mock-mournfully. "If he did, he'd have to marry

> me! And then I could be, 'Yuffie Valentine'! Doesn't that sound so  
cool?"<p>

"Yuffie!" Vincent's face was bright red.

"\$#," Cid shuddered. "There are some things I don't need

> to know, and that's one of 'em."<p>

"Hear, hear," teased Cloud.

Yuffie giggled and raised her glass. "Well, even though it's  
> been damn hard trying to run Wutai, I don't think I ever could<br>  
have done it without - "

"Me," interrupted Cait. "My sexiness, genius, and utter adorable-ness

> has helped her through her time of sorr - "<p>

Yuffie whacked him on the head. " - as I was saying, without Vincent.

> As you all know, of course. So, anyway - to Vincent."<p>

He went red again, but she exuberantly set her glass down and flung

> her arms around his neck, covering his face in kisses.<p>

"Ti-fa," Cait complained. "Tell the Hormonal Twins to stop sucking  
face."

"I can't. I think they're a gravitational force."

"Ah, #\$! it." Cid drained his entire glass. "To us - I think we  
survived

> 'nuther year."<p>

And they all lived, as well as real people can, happily ever  
after.

THE END

End  
file.